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KOINONIA

Princeton Theological Seminary
Graduate Forum

Volume I

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Spring 1989

Spring, 1989

As spokesperson for the editorial staff of the *Koinonia Journal*, I have the privilege of welcoming you to the culmination of one ambitious project and the beginning of another. In the Spring of 1988, the Koinonia Student Fellowship of Princeton Seminary issued a challenge to its membership—the creation of a graduate student journal. Four of us, hopeful, naive, bright-eyed, and in various stages of our work, found the challenge compelling. The most exciting aspect for all of us was the opportunity to provide the graduate student community (here and elsewhere) with an interdisciplinary forum in which important and new ideas could be addressed.

Our first realization was that this project could not be undertaken without the support of the Seminary. And, when we began to ask, the Seminary responded in amazing ways: Graduate students *trusted* us, fledgling editors, with their work, and came together to discuss the issues; our professors encouraged us and shared their wisdom; the Ph.D. Studies Committee gave its blessing (no strings attached); the Publications Office gave us guidance and professional contacts; and, President Gillespie and the Trustees gave us the funding we needed. Thanks to all these people, the first project is now complete and in your hands.

The second project, the "care and feeding" of a new journal is just beginning. The four original editors quickly added a fifth who is also the business manager. And, shortly we will be turning the project over to a new group of enthusiastic and capable editors—a second generation which is full of promise!

In the meantime as "rough spots" continue to be ironed out, the excitment is far from waning! The next issue is beginning to take shape and will be published in October, 1989. Future issues are already being planned.

To all our readers—we solicit your thoughts and comments. Graduate students—we solicit your paper manuscripts and book reviews on new books and classics in your field. We trust that our colleagues' work in this first issue will be an encouragement for all of us to let our voices be heard and our ideas discussed in our own community and in the theological community at large.

— PATRICIA HOWERY DAVIS

KOINONIA

VOLUME I · SPRING 1989

CONTENTS

PAGE

Prologue 1
Arthur W. Walker-Jones

Feminism and Biblical Theology: A Creative Clash 11
Carolyn Jo Pressler

Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: From Creative Clash to Perichoretic Construction 36
Stephen L. Stell

Reflections on Teaching the Bible in a Sexist World 55
Carol and Ernie Hess

Sacred Texts and Feminist Hermeneutics 68
Kimberly Parsons Chastain

Epilogue 77
Arthur W. Walker-Jones
John W. Webster

Book Reviews

Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics by Donald E. Capps 82
Robert C. Dykstra

Introduction to the Old Testament; a Feminist Perspective by Alice L. Laffey 86
Arthur Walker-Jones
Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible by Renita J. Weems 89
L. M. Day

PROLOGUE

At professional meetings of biblical scholars there are two distinct groups of people whose work has particular relevance to the church, the synagogue and contemporary culture. Curiously, there is little interaction between the two groups. The first group meets to discuss papers on biblical theology. The second group meets to discuss papers on feminist interpretation. Few women attend the discussions of biblical theology, and few men attend the discussions of feminist hermeneutics. There are a number of notable exceptions and superficial reasons for this bifurcation, but the dichotomy is real. The paper around which this forum is structured, "Feminism and Biblical Theology," makes a significant contribution to the field of biblical theology, and biblical studies in general, by addressing the reservations feminists have about biblical theology.

But before plunging into the midst of this debate, readers from other theological disciplines may find helpful a brief introduction to the field of biblical theology, especially the individuals and classic debates touched upon in the paper. One might say that I have the privilege of playing the straight *man* for Carolyn Pressler's criticisms. This introduction is necessarily as brief as possible and rather general. For more detailed discussions the reader is referred to the more extensive treatments of biblical theology in the bibliography, especially Hayes and Prussner or Reventlow. Since my area of specialty and the primary concern of the paper I am introducing is the Hebrew Bible, I will focus on theology of the Hebrew Bible, though New Testament theology shares many of the same issues.

The foundation of biblical theology as a discipline separate from dogmatic theology is generally credited to an inaugural address at the University of Altdorf in 1787 by a young German named Johann Philipp Gabler (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 1980). Gabler envisioned three stages in the movement from the bible to theology. First, the biblical theologian collects all the ideas of the biblical writers. This must be done with attention to the vocabulary, grammar and the different historical situations of the various writers in order to correctly understand what a particular writer intended. Likewise, the interpreter must guard against reading his or her ideas, particularly theological ideas, into the text. Although all the ideas of the writers are not written down, these can be inferred from those ideas they did have occasion to write down. Second, after all the ideas are collected, the biblical theologian must ask which ideas are limited to a particular historical situation and which ideas were intended by providence for all time. Third, the dogmatic theologian then uses these timeless ideas of biblical religion to construct a systematic theology that applies biblical religion to the contemporary historical situation using the language and philosophy of the time. Although he realized the historicity of systematic theology, he hoped that the simplicity of biblical religion would provide some unity for the church and limit the bewildering theological diversity of the systematic theologies appearing in his time. Gabler, thereby, suggested the foundation of a new discipline, biblical theology, and touched on many of its issues and assumptions.

But Gabler's proposal was part of a long string of historical developments. In one sense, the genesis of his proposal reaches back to the Protestant reformers who considered their theology to be a recovery of biblical religion. During the period of Protestant Orthodoxy, from the time of the reformers to the time of Gabler, collections of biblical "proof-texts" were common. These were exegetical studies of selected biblical texts arranged according to the themes of dogmatic theology and intended to show the biblical basis of Protestantism. It was becoming increasingly evident, however, that in many cases systematic theology was being read into the texts rather than derived from them. Both rationalists and pietists saw the use of historical investigation as a way to free simple, biblical religion from the complexities of dogmatic theology.

The growing influence of historical thought and many of the ideas that became part of Gabler's proposal are evident among his contemporaries to whom he acknowledges indebtedness in his address (Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, 1980:136 n. i, 138 and n. iii). Johann August Ernesti (1707-81) came to biblical studies from classical philology and attempted to formulate hermeneutical rules for interpreting the bible. Ernesti argued that a text had only one meaning—the one intended by the author—and this must be determined by close examination of the language and historical situation of the author. Johann Salomo Semler (1725-91) distinguished between the Word of God and the words of scripture. Consequently, he stressed the grammatico-historical method as the only method of interpretation and argued against the imposition of dogmatic interpretations. But it was G. T. Zachari (Sandys-Wunsch, 1980) who produced the first major work that stood somewhere between the exegesis of proof-texts and dogmatic theology. His biblical theology did not challenge church doctrines, but he was sufficiently influenced by historical thought to recognize different periods in the history of Israelite religion. Those things which were intended only for a particular situation, according to Zachari, are to be distinguished from those things which were intended for all time. During the time of Gabler, therefore, there was an increasing realization that dogmatic interpretations had been imposed on biblical texts and an emphasis on the grammatico-historical method of interpretation in order to determine the meaning of the text.

Since Gabler, the field has moved in two main directions. The first emphasizes the study of the history of religion organized chronologically. The second direction attempts a compromise between chronological and systematic presentation. Georg Lorenz Bauer produced the first chronologically organized theology of the Old Testament (1796). He, like Gabler, taught at the University of Altdorf and, in the preface to his Old Testament theology, confesses his work grew out of his discomfort with organizing his teaching around the proof-texts of Protestant Orthodoxy. Instead, he traces the historical development of Hebrew religious thought and consistently compares this with the thought of other ancient peoples. During the nineteenth century histories of Israelite religion, like Bauer's, predominated. By describing the religion of Israel and its ancient Near Eastern backgrounds they made possible intelligent reading of the Old Testament.

The twentieth century has seen several waves of renewed interest in biblical theology. A number of methodological issues, already evident in Gabler's proposal, have continued to be the subject of debate and affect the shape of the field. The relation of biblical theology to Israelite religion, on the one hand, and dogmatic, systematic or constructive theology, on the other hand, continue to be subjects of debate. The method of presentation or systematization was one issue in this discussion. At one end of the spectrum were the chronologically arranged treatments of the history of Israel's religion. At the other end of the spectrum were presentations arranged according to the themes of dogmatic theology. Generally speaking, the dogmatic organization was frequently criticized for imposing a foreign structure on the text and the chronological arrangement was criticized for being unable to bring out the essence and structural coherence of Israelite religion. Thus some presentations attempted to mediate between the two extremes. In an important article, Walther Eichrodt suggested that in contrast to the historical, genetic presentations of the religion of Israel, biblical theology was a systematic presentation of the essence of that religion. As long as biblical theology did not make judgments about truth and value, but only tried to understand "that which the Old Testament actually means," then biblical theology remained within the realm of history (1929:85-86). Eichrodt carried out this proposal in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, organizing the discussion around the idea of covenant (1961). A number of others have suggested other centers around which to organize a biblical theology. Walther Zimmerli gives special attention to the revelation of the name Yahweh and the statement "I am that I am"

(1975:97-118). Similarily, Schmid proposes "creation faith" as the "broad horizon" of biblical theology (1984:102-117).

The most influential opponent of Eichrodt's systematic presentation and the quest for a center of theology of the Hebrew Bible has been Gerhard von Rad. He argues that such a unified presentation is impossible because the religious diversity uncovered by historical investigation can in no way be harmonized. Curiously, despite his protestations to the contrary, von Rad also found a unifying dynamic around which to organize his *Theology of the Old Testament*—the way each new generation confessed to be the people of God by retelling the old confessions so as to make them contemporary (tradition history). Therefore, his objections should probably be understood as directed against the construction of abstract thought worlds foreign to Israel and not to any unitary presentation. Von Rad has also been frequently criticized for his inability to adequately treat such topics as the wisdom literature and creation using the retelling of the mighty acts of God as an organizing dynamic. This criticism assumes that a biblical theologian should include fair and adequate treatments of all parts of the Hebrew Bible in a systematic presentation.

As a way of getting beyond the impasse created by Eichrodt and von Rad's approaches, and as a way of organizing the diversity of the Hebrew Bible into a whole, a number of dialectic or polar presentations have appeared in recent years. Claus Westermann, for instance, organizes his discussion of Old Testament theology around blessing and deliverance (1982). Samuel Terrien's biblical theology centers around the presence of God, but makes use of a number of dialectics, such as the contrast between aesthetic and ethical (1978). Similarily, Paul Hanson organizes his discussions of biblical theology around polarities such as visionary and pragmatic (1982). And Walter Brueggemann attempts to catch all these various polarities up in the one polarity of "structure legitimation" and "embrace of pain" (1980; 1985a; 1985b). Although the majority of these theologians identify themselves as male feminists, these polar structures make their theologies problematic for feminists. Whether one thinks the structures derive from the bible itself, or from the minds of the authors under the influence of dialectic theology, or both, they epitomize the polarities characteristic of western, male thinking that have been extensively criticized by feminists (Setel: 1985). Like systematic presentations organized around a center, or traditional historical unities like von Rad's, these polar organizations desire to include fair and adequate treatments of all parts of the Bible.

A second aspect of the ongoing discussion of the relation of biblical theology to Israelite religion and systematic theology is the frequently voiced distinction between descriptive and normative work. The idea is that, whereas systematic theologians make judgments about truth, truth claims and validity, biblical theologians should restrict themselves to "objective" description of the theology of the bible. During the first half of the twentieth century most theologies of the Old Testament attempted to be "objective" in the sense that they did not make overt value judgments and truth claims. Krister Stendahl's article, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *Interpreters' Dictionary of the Bible* expresses well the understanding of that era. He makes the distinction between "what it meant" and "what it means" (1962:419) and calls for a "descriptive" biblical theology that describes what the bible meant.

Today the carefully maintained distinctions between normative and descriptive, what it means and what it meant, are showing signs of erosion. "Any assumption that one can readily determine 'what it meant'," writes Hayes, "has itself serious methodological flaws." Even if it were possible to know the mind of an ancient author, recent discussions in literary criticism make it increasingly implausible that meaning resides solely in the intention of the author. The division between normative and descriptive is also eroding. Again Hayes writes:

> "some evaluative and normative decisions seem inevitable in such study . . . there has to be some selection of material, and most theological and even historical study has been pursued under the assumption that the material being treated has some relevance to the contemporary situation" (Hayes and Prussner, 1985:209).

Most descriptions of the Hebrew Bible are, at the same time, normative for theology. It would be difficult for any theologian to blindly ignore the results of historical criticism and produce a theology that was persuasive to the contemporary world. Thus both the practicality and the reality of these distinctions between normative and descriptive seem suspect.

Despite the difficulties, many in the field continue to view their work in ways very similar to Stendahl. Stendahl himself recognizes that: "Every historian is subjective in the selection of material, and it is often said that he does more harm when he thinks himself to be objective." He admits that previous generations read the philosophies of their own times into the text all the while subjectively convinced they were being objective. "All this naturally calls for caution," he says. "But the relativity of human objectivity does not give us an excuse to excel in bias, not even when we state our bias in an introductory chapter." (Stendahl, 1962:419) Many in the field, like Stendahl, see the problems and dangers of the belief in "objectivity," but still hold it as an ideal because they see the alternative as subjective, biased reading of texts. Certainly, imposing one's biases upon the text is irresponsible scholarship. But Stendahl has set up a false dichotomy. The biased reading of texts is not the only alternative to his way of viewing the discipline.

Hans Georg Gadamer has extensively critiqued the philosophical foundations of conceptions of historical understanding like Stendahl's. According to Gadamer, interpreters understand a text not by shedding all presuppositions and trying to abstract themselves from history, but by risking their presuppositions. Meaning is created by the play between the presuppositions of the interpreter and the text. True understanding, "true objectivity" comes from self-critical awareness of one's own presuppositions and an openness to the text.

While Gadamer's work is widely read in the field of biblical studies, the discipline as a whole has not yet developed the new language, the new modes of conceptualizaton, and a more critical awareness of presuppositions, that would signal a major paradigm shift. Perhaps it is easy for us middle and upper-middle class, male interpreters, reading texts written by middle or upper-middle class males, to think that we are objectively describing what they say. Because we share many of the same presuppositions as the texts and fellow interpreters, those biases go unexamined. Those feminists who cannot share these presuppositions, however, are painfully aware of the constructive nature of all history (Fiorenza, 1985) and theology. They do not advocate the biased distortion of the meaning of texts, but they see especially clearly that the blind spots hiding behind the name of "objectivity" are uncritical and in some cases immoral (cf. Laffey, 1988:1).

In summary, this prologue attempts to introduce the names and issues in biblical theology necessary to take part in the following discussion. The origins and history of biblical theology give it a strong aversion to the imposition of dogmatic ideas on the biblical text and a coordinate emphasis on historical-critical investigation. Consequently, biblical theologians often assume that a text has one meaning, the one intended by the author. Most biblical theologians are concerned with the systematic presentation of the whole bible, whether that is a logical unity (Gabler), a systematic presentation of the religion of Israel with covenant as the center (Eichrodt), a polar presentation (Brueggemann), a broad horizon (Schmid), or a tradition historical unity (von Rad). Frequently, biblical theologians view their field as descriptive and historical as opposed to normative and theological. While this distinction has been showing signs of instability in recent years, the field as a whole has not yet experienced a paradigm shift. Feminists, however, are in the forefront of the transformation of the field where our discussion begins.

— ARTHUR W. WALKER-JONES

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Feminism and Biblical Theology:

A Creative Clash

CAROLYN JO PRESSLER

INTRODUCTION

This essay was written for a class session on "Feminism and Biblical Theology" during a graduate seminar in Old Testament Theology. It was shaped from the beginning by my effort to relate, as a feminist, to an overwhelmingly male-dominated field of study. Most bibliographies of biblical theology include few or no women's names, and there is no mention of feminist issues, or of the recent burgeoning results of feminist biblical scholarship, among standard surveys of biblical theology (cf. Hayes and Prussner, Hasel, or Coats). My primary concern, however, was not the absence of women among the scholars whom we studied. Rather, I was troubled by a growing sense that the definitions and approaches of male biblical theologians seemed to be in tension with fundamental feminist presuppositions. This essay is thus an attempt to assess how feminist presuppositions challenge traditional approaches to biblical theology. Where is the clash? And it is an attempt to suggest ways in which feminists can and do engage in aspects of the task of biblical theology. What is our creative response?

The first section of this essay examines the work of three feminist scholars—Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Radford Ruether—who represent what I take to be three main directions of feminist biblical hermeneutics: literary retelling of women's stories, feminist reconstruction of the history of biblical women, and the identification of a liberating biblical principle by which text and culture may be critiqued.

The work of these scholars evinces both affinity and discontinuity with traditional biblical theology. Fiorenza explicitly reconstructs biblical, historical theology as feminist theology (1983:xv). Trible calls her work biblical theology, by which she means that she seeks to draw a feminist theological vision from particular biblical texts. Ruether is a constructive theologian; however, she acts as a biblical theologian when she identifies a central, liberating biblical dynamic by which to evaluate which parts of the Bible are authoritative, and what constitutes their authority. Yet these feminists' emphases and presuppositions are often strikingly different from those of traditional, male biblical theology.

"Biblical theology" is admittedly a rather amorphous term. There is no consensus around its definition, task, method, content or even independent existence. Moreover, the discipline is rapidly changing; recent biblical theologians show many more points of contact with feminists than those to whom I will refer. Nonetheless, the biblical theologians whom our seminar examined (Gabler, Von Hofmann, Eichrodt, Von Rad, and more contemporaneously, Brueggemann, Hanson and Childs) may be taken as representatives of the discipline. Their works, while diverse, share certain assumptions and definitions. (Each attempts to treat the whole of the Old Testament or the Bible, seeking a unity which integrates biblical diversity. There has been an emphasis on allowing the Bible to speak on its own terms, and an implicit assumption the Bible has a "right reading" which it is the task of biblical theology to find.)

The second part of my essay explores how Fiorenza's, Trible's and Ruether's feminist perspectives challenge these scholars' assumptions and priorities.

Given feminism's challenge to traditional biblical theology, one must ask whether the discipline is relevant to feminists. Is biblical theology on the feminist agenda? Or, to rephrase the question more precisely, which of the tasks of biblical theology are possible and useful for feminists? The final part of this essay suggests three ways in which feminists can and do engage in comprehensive theological explication of the Bible.

A word about my own presuppositions is in order. First, I do not come to this essay as an impartial observer, but as a feminist whose commitments shape my perceptions. Among the wide range of feminist attitudes toward the Bible, I find myself with those who experience Scripture as patriarchal but also liberating and constitutive of identity. The issues which most concern me arise from the challenge of holding in tension the oppressive aspects of the Bible as well as its freeing visions. I have chosen to examine the theologies of feminist scholars who work from this "reformist" position.

Second, while I use the phrase "biblical theologians" to refer to the male scholars whose works we have studied, it would be more accurate to add the qualifications: "white, male, European and North American." Similarly, I use the word "feminist," knowing that it should be qualified by the words "white, North American." I acknowledge the particularity of my perspective, and of those women whose work I present, and invite women and men with other perspectives to join the conversation.

I. FEMINIST BIBLICAL INTERPRETERS

ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA: RECOVERING WOMEN'S PAST

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* (1983) is a feminist historical reconstruction of Christian origins. According to Fiorenza, the Bible's relative silence about women does not mean that there were no women leaders in the early church. Rather, androcentrism, operating at each stage of its composition, erased women from the New Testament. Fiorenza seeks to go beneath the text to recover early church history as a history of women and men.

Her method combines historical critical tools with a feminist perspective. Fiorenza argues that historians never objectively describe "what really happened." Rather, they select and order data according to questions and models that are shaped by particular world views, and that function to serve particular communities. In contrast to dominant androcentric historical scholarship, Fiorenza asks questions and develops interpretive models which assume women, as well as men, played central roles in the early history of Christianity. She thus is able to see previously overlooked evidence of both women's experience of oppression and women's leadership in the early church.

Fiorenza finds in the Jesus movement and the early Christian missionary movements a vision and a model which have transformative potential for contemporary Christian women. She describes the Jesus movement's understanding of God as the inclusively gracious and kind *Sophia* [Wisdom], and God's *basileia* [realm] as the wholeness and well-being of all people. Similarly, the early missionary movement understood the risen Lord as *Sophia*-Spirit, inaugurator of the new creation in which women and men participated equally. Fiorenza believes that the vision of *Sophia*-God evoked communities of equal disciples. She analyzes several parables which point to women's contributions to the Jesus movement and lifts up data in Acts and the Pauline epistles that confirm women's leadership roles in the early missionary movement. Thus, Fiorenza finds in early Christianity a theology and a model of community which can be used to critique the church's subsequent accommodation to patriarchy, and to inform contemporary women's church.

Fiorenza does not identify this vision or model as her theological norm. Rather, she locates normative authority in the experience of women struggling for liberation. This theological norm, variously stated, insists that whatever oppresses (especially whatever oppresses women) cannot be the Word of God. The Bible (or, rather, biblical history) does function authoritatively in Fiorenza's system, but not as an abstract principle or a timeless truth. Rather, it serves as a "prototype," the original (pluriform) model of the church, from which the church grew and was shaped, but that can (as a model) be critiqued by the contemporary church.

Fiorenza (like G. E. Wright and others) takes biblical history, not textual interpretation, as the "stuff" of theology. She does, however, suggest ways of approaching the text. First, she calls for critical evaluation of all texts, to determine which passages function to support patriarchy and which are liberating. Only those texts which transcend their patriarchal origins are to be considered revelatory Scripture and proclaimed. Finally, she calls for women to creatively reinterpret and appropriate the Bible stories through dance, story and art.

ASSESSMENT OF FIORENZA

Fiorenza's accomplishment is too massive to assess here in any detail. Her historical critical approach and her choice of patriarchy as an interpretive key allow her to analyze carefully the social and political contexts from which the New Testament arose and in which the Bible has been used to subjugate or to liberate women. Her detailed demonstration of the androcentric biases operating at every step of the development of the final form of the New Testament—oral transmission, the writing down of oral traditions, redactional activity, canonization and textual transmission—frees her from taking at face value the relative absence of women in the biblical accounts in order to reconstruct the history of early Christianity as a history of women and men. Thus she can claim biblical history as a resource for feminist theology.

Fiorenza's historical approach calls attention to the recurrent question of how biblical history and biblical texts are related as theological sources. Her own treatment of the relationship of text and history is unclear. In *Bread Not Stone*, she suggests hermeneutical approaches to the text itself, calling for the proclamation of *all* passages which are liberating to women (1984a:19). However, elsewhere she seems to value texts primarily as historical resources: "Biblical revelation and truth are given only in those texts that . . . allow for a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects and actors" (1983:30). Her "hermeneutics of proclamation" does not seem to have any integral relationship to her historical theological base. One is left wondering how feminists can appropriate the liberating potential of texts such as Gen. 1:27 which do not contribute to historical reconstruction.

The challenge to appropriate biblical texts as well as biblical history is most acute for Protestant women. Mary Ann Tolbert (1987) has pointed out that Protestant feminists, heirs of a tradition that locates primary theological authority in the Bible, have difficulty accepting Fiorenza's emphasis on history, and her vesting authority in the community. Fiorenza's method also poses particular challenges for feminist students of the Old Testament. Can we hope to discover evidence of a "community of equal disciples" within ancient Israel's history? Given the extreme scarcity of sources, to what extent can we hope to reconstruct a comparable history of Israelite women? As a Protestant Old Testament student, I feel a need to find ways of using the biblical texts as a theological source.

PHYLLIS TRIBLE: RETELLING WOMEN'S TALES

Phyllis Trible "retells" stories about women, highlighting passages long neglected or (in her view) misinterpreted by dominant scholarship. Where Fiorenza seeks to get beneath biblical texts to their underlying history, Trible derives her theological meaning from the language of the texts abstracted from their historical context. Her methodological approach is rhetorical criticism, that is, a close, disciplined examination of the rhetorical cues by which a text conveys meaning.

Trible has no interest in dealing with the whole of the canon; she explicitly is neither interested in setting forth a comprehensive program nor explicating dominant themes of the Hebrew Bible (1978:xvi). Rather, she wants to lift up "countervoices" which celebrate positive pictures of women or which grieve for female victims of male violence. She thus focuses on specific passages about women that she allows to resonate with each other and with thematic scriptural verses.

Trible views biblical interpretation as an art rather than a science. She describes her interpretive approach; she does not systematically present a method. Her "hermeneutical clue" is twofold. First, she examines the way in which, in Old Testament narratives, diverse redactions of a tradition (specifically Exod. 34:6-7) emerge to suggest different meanings and to serve different functions. The freedom shown by Scripture to reinterpret Scripture in multiple ways, by no fixed set of rules, serves as warrant and guide for modern retelling of biblical texts. The second part of Trible's hermeneutical clue comes from the contemporary context. Feminism, which she defines as "a critique of culture in light of misogyny" (Trible 1978:7), determines which passages she examines and what questions she asks.

Trible argues for the multivalence of the text. Not only will texts be interpreted differently in different contexts; two feminists, using the same rhetorical method, may arrive at different readings of the same passage. However, meaning is not arbitrary, or entirely reader-centered. The interpreter and the Bible interact. "The text, as form and content, limits construction of itself and does in fact stand as a potential witness against all readings" (Trible 1978:11).

Trible's understanding of biblical authority seems to shift between her two books. In *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978), Trible presents positive stories about women and feminine imagery for the deity that she views as the basis for a "remnant theology" that would have normative force. (She does not, however, establish a basis for distinguishing between authoritative and non-authoritative texts). *Texts of Terror* (1984) retells biblical stories of victimized women, giving the women an integrity which the biblical accounts often neglect. In this book, Scripture functions as a "mirror," reflecting the "holiness and horror" of women's lives.

Trible does not argue for the normative validity of women's experience or explicitly critique women's domination by men. Rather, with precise attention to language, she tells biblical stories, and lets the stories speak. These tales become a powerful, implicit "critique of culture in light of misogyny" (1978:7).

As different as Trible's literary treatment of the text is from Fiorenza's feminist historical reconstruction, the Bible functions with a similar kind of authority in the work of these two women. As Fiorenza reclaims women's historical heritage, remembering both women's oppression and women's agency, Trible reclaims our textual heritage, mourning women's pain, and celebrating our strength. She re-presents imagery, symbols and stories that call upon the imagination, to inform one's understanding of self and God. For Trible, as for Fiorenza, the authority of the Bible lies in its capacity to shape identity.

ASSESSMENT OF TRIBLE

Trible has chosen to engage in an intrinsic reading of the texts—that is, to examine them apart from their historical contexts. This methodological decision means that she cannot analyze the social or political factors that shaped the Bible, or the way in which the Bible functions to legitimize or undercut patriarchy. Nor does Trible deal with biblical principles that support women's liberation. She has set for herself the more limited task of articulating stories that speak to women and men's imagination. Trible is far more a poet than a theoretician.

Trible finds warrant for her feminist reinterpretation of biblical texts in the multiple retelling of particular traditions found within the Old Testament. She does not, however, develop grounds for asserting the authority of her "remnant theology." What claims upon us are made by the "neglected" texts which portray women positively? What is the basis for those claims?

It may be that Trible is not interested in making normative claims. Perhaps the stories' authority rests in their ability to illuminate and reflect experience. Still, I find myself unsatisfied. It seems to me that we need to be able to claim that texts which support the liberation of women are theologically more authoritative than those stories that support patriarchy.

Nonetheless, Trible highlights a frequently overlooked, yet important dimension of biblical theology. Biblical stories and imagery, which shape one's imagination and feelings, affect the reader as much as biblical injunctions or principles. If Trible's work is only a part of what needs to be done, it is a vital part, just as emotion and imagination are a vital aspect of women's lives.

ROSEMARY RUETHER: RECONTEXTUALIZING LIBERATING PRINCIPLES

Rosemary Radford Ruether, though not a biblical scholar, is a major proponent of a third approach to feminist biblical hermeneutics, that of locating a liberating principle within the Bible. While Fiorenza focuses on history and Trible attends particularly to texts, Ruether (1983:24) identifies a biblical "center," the prophetic-liberating tradition. This tradition includes four themes: (1) God's vindication of the oppressed; (2) a critique of systems of power; (3) the belief that God's just and peaceful reign will one day overcome all present injustice; (4) a critique of religion as it serves to justify dominant, unjust power systems (Ruether, 1983:24).

Like Brueggemann (1979), Ruether describes those destabilizing biblical traditions which stand over against another complex of biblical texts that serve to legitimize the status quo. She does not, however, view both traditions as revelatory. Rather, the normative status of the prophetic principle is asserted on two grounds. The first is its presumed distinctiveness among Ancient Near Eastern religions. Second, she argues that the Bible itself presents the prophetic traditions as its "critical and central norm" that Israel continually reapplies to new situations (Ruether, 1986:11). Texts legitimizing the status quo are to be understood as a deformation of true prophetic religion, and evaluated in light of the prophetic traditions.

The prophetic principle is not a set of ideas, but a dynamic process running throughout Israel's history, and requiring continual discernment of God's liberating will for new situations. Fidelity to the prophetic norm thus not only allows for, but absolutely requires, that it be reinterpreted to meet contemporary needs. While the prophets, limited by their social location, did not address issues of justice for women, Ruether holds that the prophetic norm can and must now be reappropriated to include women among the oppressed whose liberation God seeks. Any aspect of the Bible or biblical religion which justifies patriarchy must then be rejected.

Ruether correlates the prophetic biblical norm with an explicitly feminist norm: that is, the promotion of the full humanity of women. “Whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine” (1983:18). This norm, she says, arises from the experience of women as they become critically conscious of—and hence potentially free from—the ways in which male interpretations of experience have been imposed upon them (Ruether, 1985:114).

ASSESSMENT OF RUETHER

One may question various aspects of Ruether’s identification of “the central and critical biblical norm.” Her use of “distinctiveness” as a criterion for determining what was central to Israel is dubious. Her description of the prophetic dynamic may be overstated. Did the prophets really call for the radical elimination of hierarchical structures as Ruether envisions, or were they more concerned for fair treatment of the poor within a hierarchical social system? Moreover, Fiorenza’s (1983:17-18) concern that the prophetic traditions must, like every part of the Bible, be critically examined in light of feminist values is also well taken. The prophetic impulse may be for liberation, but prophetic language (e.g., its use of harlotry/rape imagery for sin and judgment) is often misogynist. Finally, Ruether seems to be inconsistent in claiming to have discerned *the* central biblical dynamic while stressing the importance of the sociology of consciousness. If everyone is limited by her or his presuppositions, and if the same idea has very different meanings in different settings, is it possible to speak of *one* central principle?

Nonetheless, Ruether’s method—identifying biblical liberating principles and reinterpreting them within the contemporary context—is extremely fruitful. Finding correlations between their fundamental (non-negotiable) commitments, and basic biblical dynamics is necessary if feminists are to be able to appropriate the biblical text in a wholistic rather than a fragmentary or eclectic way. At the same time, Ruether's approach allows feminists to examine the scriptures critically. Ruether's work suggests that feminists might identify and re-contextualize a variety of liberating biblical principles, such as the first commandment's condemnation of idolatry, or the mutuality between women and men suggested by the priestly creation account.

II. FEMINISM AND THE ASSUMPTIONS OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Fiorenza places women, as well as men, at the center of biblical history; Trible explicates biblical stories portraying women (as well as men) as recipients and agents of divine grace; Ruether articulates the contemporary prophetic demand that the injustice of sexism be overcome. The obvious common thread in these scholars' otherwise diverse works is that they self-consciously interpret the Bible to serve the welfare of women. Their scholarship is deliberately engaged; the theological norm shaping it is a commitment to women's well-being. The differences which a feminist perspective makes to biblical theology cluster around its use of women's well-being as a critical principle, and its insistence that scholarship is necessarily engaged. I will look at these two in turn.

WOMEN'S WELL-BEING AS A THEOLOGICAL NORM

"The critical principle of feminist theology," writes Ruether, "is the promotion of the full humanity of women" (1983:18). Fiorenza makes a similar claim when she argues that whatever oppresses is not Scripture or, positively, when she locates her theological norm in the experience of women struggling for liberation. Trible implicitly uses such a critical principle when she distinguishes between texts reflecting holiness and those expressing horror.

The feminists use this critical principle to determine what is to be considered revelatory. Aspects of the Bible which support patriarchy or devalue women are denied theological authority. Constructively, feminist criteria do or should shape both feminist methodology for interpreting history or text, and the theological authority granted the text (cf. Harrison, 1984:150).

A critical appraisal of the varying authority of biblical texts is present in the works of several Old Testament theologians. Since Semler, a distinction between the "Word of God" and the "words of Scripture" has been assumed (Hayes and Prussner, 1984:59). The contrast between descriptive and normative theology was a key component of Gabler's program (cf. Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge). Especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, efforts were made to sort out which aspects of the Bible were revelatory, and which were not.

In contrast, for a period Old Testament theology was regarded, at least by some schools, as a purely descriptive task. In recent decades, however, the distinction between descriptive and normative biblical theology seems to have blurred. According to George Coats (1985:244), renewed focus on the question of the Old Testament's authority for the contemporary church or synagogue led to granting normative authority to descriptions of OT theology: the "method for an OT theology develops a combination of descriptive procedures with normative assumptions." Thus, for example, Walter Brueggemann, describing the two thrusts which he finds in the Old Testament argues that both are rooted in the nature of God (1979). Childs (1985) describes how texts function in the final form of the canon, and assumes that form's normativeness. The critical principle is lost.

Establishing a critical principle, which may or may not be present in traditional biblical theology, is essential to the feminist task. Feminists hold that texts which support patriarchy must be examined, assessed, and rejected or reinterpreted, lest theology pass on values damaging to women and men. Failure to recognize patriarchal aspects of the Bible, or efforts to apologize for them, legitimize harmful texts.

The critique is wide-ranging in scope. While assessments of biblical androcentrism vary among feminists, Fiorenza and Ruether represent a great number of women (including myself) when they argue that the Bible is thoroughly (though not unremittingly) patriarchal. (Trible also implicitly acknowledges biblical androcentism when she relinquishes the dominant themes of the Old Testament to seek a "remnant theology.") The Bible not only portrays women's subordination to men, but at times explicitly enjoins it (Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-4:1). Its negative effect on women involves not only explicit statements about women (laws, proverbs, etc.), but also pervasively androcentric stories and symbols that, addressing the imagination, shape one's perceptions of women and men. Both testaments are shaped by patriarchy. Feminists cannot turn to the New Testament to find texts by which to criticize the Old Testament.

Moreover, the feminist critical principle has a strong ethical dimension. Texts or aspects of texts which are deemed oppressive are not just disregarded, but denounced as unethical. An interpreter "must name the language of hate by its name" (Fiorenza 1985b:130).

While a critical principle plays a role in earlier biblical theologies, the centrality, scope, and ethical dimension of the feminist critique of the Bible represents a significant departure from traditional biblical theology—and raises difficult issues. A feminist perspective challenges biblical theologians to appropriate biblical texts in liberating ways while recognizing their oppressive aspects.

The challenge which a feminist perspective brings to biblical theology becomes more problematic in light of the explicit experiential basis of the feminist critical principle. Fiorenza and Ruether place far greater emphasis on the experiential basis of their theological norms than do traditional biblical theologians. While von Hofmann (1956:26) derives his norm (in part) from the personal experience of salvation, such explicit recognition of experience as a theological source is unusual. Norms (whether universal and timeless biblical ideas [cf. Gabler], or New Testament revelation [cf. Eichrodt]) are assumed to be drawn from the Bible. In contrast, Fiorenza and Ruether both insist that their specifically *feminist* critical principle (Fiorenza's opposition to the oppression of women, or Ruether's promotion of the full humanity of women) derive from experience.

This is not to deny that the Bible itself informs women's experience, providing visions of a whole humanity which enable us to stand outside of traditional expectations. Ruether explicitly affirms continuity between the prophetic paradigm and its feminist contemporary "restatement." Similarly, Fiorenza recognizes the liberating (as well as oppressive) impact of biblical religion on her perspective. "My vision of Christian life-style, responsibility, and community," she says, "brought me to reject the culturally imposed role of women and not vice versa" (1979:137). Nonetheless, there is a shift in the recognized basis of normative authority; Fiorenza and Ruether insist on the right of feminists to make theological judgments based on their experience.

They have reason. While the Bible criticizes oppression in general terms, it never specifically critiques patriarchy. It offers a picture of humanity as created, loved and redeemed by God, but generally fails to recognize that women are fully members of that humanity, or that female-male relationships must be mutual. I do not think that we can recognize and reject sexism, or claim the Bible's liberating visions for women, without turning to our own experience and to the experience of feminists with whom we are in community.

Moreover, the authority of women's opposition to domination has an integrity independent of Scripture or tradition. While there likely is biblical support for women's struggle for liberation, if one could prove beyond any doubt that the Bible enjoined women's subordination to men, I still could not submit to that judgment. A feminist perspective requires claiming the authority of women's own experience, including the authority to use that experience to critique the Bible.

The impact of experience on the selection of a biblical theologian's norm is not new. Arthur Walker-Jones (1989), following David Kelsey, has analyzed the way in which theological decisions (which I presume are partially experientially based) determine which aspects of Scripture scholars consider normative. What is new is that feminists *explicitly* insist upon the authoritative role of experience in constructing theology, and that *women's* experience is deemed normative.

Feminists, explicitly recognizing the experiential basis of their critical principle, and articulating the discrepancy between that principle and much of the Bible, raise with new force recurrent questions in biblical theology. If one's assumptions, organizing principles, or norms are external to the text, can one speak with integrity of biblical theology as an independent discipline? What view of biblical authority can such a theology hold?

Both Ruether and Fiorenza make the case that their theological norms are grounded in, or continuous with, aspects of biblical history or aspects of the biblical texts that are more basic than patriarchy. Fiorenza finds a community of equal disciples in the early Christian movement that allows her to claim the New Testament church as a resource for feminist theology. Ruether lays hold of a central biblical dynamic by which to criticize and reappropriate or reject other parts of Scripture. Establishing congruence between one's theological norms and a basic biblical principle or event does seem an essential task of biblical theology.

Since the biblical texts all emerged from, and are shaped by patriarchy, feminist efforts to ground their critical norm in Scripture require a dynamic view of the Bible or biblical history, so that androcentric texts or models may be appropriated in non-chauvinistic ways. Trible, for example, finds warrant for her hermeneutic in the way in which Scripture freely reappropriates its own traditions. Ruether argues that the prophetic principle not only allows but demands that the meaning of justice be reinterpreted in each new context. Fiorenza calls the early Christian church a "root model," open to criticism and change.

Feminists' recognition of the experiential basis of their critical norm requires a dialogical understanding of biblical authority. Fiorenza and (recently) Ruether (1984:148) view the Bible as a "prototype," a model that has historically given structure to the faith community, and continues to suggest possible modes of community, but that is open to criticism. Trible refers to the Bible as a "mirror," allowing us to see our lives with more clarity. Arthur

Walker-Jones (in conversation) suggests understanding biblical authority in light of human authority. A person gains authority by engaging in dialogue, responding, illuminating, and convincing but not by harshly imposing her or his view. The Bible's authority, from a feminist perspective, may be more like that of a person than that of a rule.

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

Feminist biblical scholars, developing methodologies which accord women a significance equal to that of men, are not thereby introducing political and social bias into an otherwise disinterested discipline. The Bible wields an authority which grants tremendous social and political influence; biblical theology (as Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw) is an inescapably political act. Nor is the interpreter ever free from particular biases, including those of race, gender and class.

Discussions related to "women and the Bible" are particularly politically charged. Feminist biblical scholarship in this country emerged largely in response to men's use of Scriptures to argue against women's emancipation (cf. Gifford, 1985; Bass, 1982:6-12). Biblical arguments continue to be used against (and, with the advent of feminist biblical interpretation, for) women in such political struggles as women's ordination. No biblical study related to women can escape the political ramifications of the Bible's long history as a weapon against women (cf. Fiorenza, 1983:7-14).

Indeed, Fiorenza and other feminists deny the possibility of any disinterested scholarship. The opposite of feminism (which regards women as well as men as fully human, and fully historical agents) is not neutrality but androcentrism (which views male, but not female, experience as normative.) Feminists emphasize the impact of social location on both the biblical authors and biblical interpreters.

This is not entirely new for biblical theology. The impact of biblical theologians' confessional presuppositions on their work has been noted by both von Hofmann (1959:26) and Eichrodt

(1961:36). Critics analyzing various biblical theologies have been especially sensitive to the way in which the theologians' denominational stances are reflected in their work.

Nonetheless, the assumption that biblical interpretation can (or should) be value-neutral seems to dominate traditional biblical theologies. The Bible is to be "read on its own terms." This has often meant that clues for organizing the material as well as questions put to the text are supposed to be derived from Scripture itself. Scholars' descriptions of the aim or task of biblical theology seem to imply the possibility of grasping *the* correct reading and ordering biblical texts (as do their arguments with one another). Moreover, traditional biblical theologians' discussion of their presuppositions has been limited largely to confessional or philosophical positions; explicit recognition of their social or political biases has been missing from their works. Feminists argue that scholars must recognize and acknowledge how their race, class and gender have influenced their own and others' work, in order that those biases may be subject to critical evaluation.

A corollary to feminists' stress on the importance of social location is their emphasis on the role of the community. Because it is *for* a particular group, theology must be written from a community, and assessed in terms of its impact on the community. This concern is not entirely new. Von Hofmann stressed the importance of membership in a community of faith (1959:26-27). Hanson, especially, has related his work to the faith community (1986: app. A). In feminist biblical interpretation, however, the community plays a much more central role than has commonly been acknowledged by traditional biblical theologians.

IMPLICATIONS

If feminists are correct in arguing that every biblical theology is conditioned by the particular presuppositions of the interpreter, what can one say about the numerous possible biblical theologies? Is any reading equally possible? Are all accurate readings equally valid? How can a norm based on particular experience and/or on a particular reading of the Bible have critical force?

None of the three feminists we have looked at suggest that one's social location entirely determines one's reading of the Bible (or of biblical history). Textual and historical data limit the range of possible interpretations. The hermeneutical circle of interpreter-text-interpreter is recognized.

Nor are all accurate readings equally valid. The interests and aims which shape a particular biblical theology (or a particular community) are themselves subject to critical examination in light of a defensible ethic, on the one hand, and theological consistency, on the other.

The feminist critical principle depends on an ethical norm against making the particularity of androcentrism an absolute. Restated, the norm is against domination of one particular group by another. This norm, in turn, is rooted in a theological assertion about God. Fiorenza's frequent statement that the Word of God cannot be oppressive depends on her belief that God is just. This assertion, it seems to me, rests on one's experience of God (as life-givingly present in the midst of the liberation struggle), on the affirmations of the community, and also on Scripture. A feminist perspective can critique other perspectives as oppressive; it cannot make its own particularity an absolute. If one believes that God is opposed to domination and/or idolatry, then theological consistency seems to require examining the biases in one's method and interpretation. We cannot avoid the particularity of our perspective; we can subject our presuppositions to an ethical or theological critique. All vantage points are particular; not all are equal.

In practice, we white feminists are also limited by our social location, and often fail to see the exclusivity of our claims. Fiorenza, for example, frequently reminds the reader that feminism opposes all hierarchies, especially since women are the poorest of the poor. Amongst those poor women struggling for freedom, she adds, God's grace is most present.

I believe it. However, I am concerned that the poverty and the grace of third world women not be used to justify the theologies of white first world women. A statement like Fiorenza's is useful when it leads us to listen carefully and responsively to women oppressed by racism or classism, or when it motivates us to participate appropriately in their political struggle. There is, however, a continual danger that white women (myself included) will co-opt rather than cooperate with women and men of color.

III. FEMINISM AND COMPREHENSIVE TASKS OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

A feminist perspective clearly challenges prevalent presuppositions of biblical theology. Feminists, insisting that the theological claims of biblical texts be evaluated against an experientially based critical principle, are not introducing entirely new elements into biblical interpretation. Nor is the acknowledgment that feminists work from and for their community without precedent. These elements, however, that have previously had only occasional or secondary roles in biblical theology, are essential and central to feminist approaches to the Bible.

Such shifts in basic assumptions raise questions about the ways in which biblical theology has been done. It is not possible, given the feminist positions described above, to attempt a disengaged explication of the theology(ies) of the biblical authors. Nor may one simply assume the normative claims of the various theologies expressed in the Bible. Any approach which uncritically combines "descriptive procedures with normative assumptions" (Coats, 1985:244) is precluded. Finally, we feminists cannot aim at articulating *the* definitive biblical center, or dynamic, or pattern, without contradicting our own presuppositions.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that feminists' interest in the Bible goes beyond theological reflection on particular passages. Articulating for ourselves how we can regard the Bible as both liberating and patriarchal seems to require explicating our view of the Bible as a "whole." The work of Fiorenza, Ruether and Trible suggests at least three ways in which a comprehensive theological approach to the Bible is possible and important for those feminists who choose to remain within biblical religion. First, feminists need to engage in ongoing explication and evaluation of the theologies found in the biblical texts. Awareness of the impact of social location on the reader means that one cannot hope to get at an objective description of the biblical writer's theologies. Fiorenza has rightly called for careful examination of how biblical texts have functioned theologically and ideologically within both their ancient and contemporary contexts. She also rightly notes that feminists have just begun the evaluative task, and that the debate over whether and when particular texts are oppressive or liberating will be ongoing. The same text, approached with different methods, may be found liberating or sexist. Even using the same method, feminist scholars have arrived at opposite conclusions about the same text. For instance, Cheryl Exum [1985] uses a rhetorical critical approach to celebrate the "Mother of Israel." Esther Fuchs [1985], also a rhetorical critic, examining the same stories, concludes that they support patriarchy. Our evaluation of the text must deal with the fact that many passages are neither unambiguously liberating nor unambiguously oppressive.

Second, I have argued that feminists who choose to stay within biblical religion need to find in the Bible or biblical history patterns or events which correlate with our theological norms. Fiorenza finds such grounding in the community of equal disciples in the early Christian movements. Ruether identifies the prophetic principle as a central biblical dynamic which correlates with her feminist critical principle. Trible does not look for overarching patterns, but seeks a "remnant theology" in biblical "counterliterature." It seems to me, however, that her work leaves unanswered the question how these "remnant" texts can make claims upon us, while other, patriarchal texts are not theologically binding.

The alternative to grounding one's theological norms in biblical history or the biblical texts, it seems to me, is either to find within Scriptures usable images, themes or stories that one incorporates into an eclectic theology or to reject the biblical tradition altogether. Both are legitimate options for feminists; neither (I believe) is a Christian option. Those of us who choose to stay within Christianity must seek basic biblical patterns or events which allow us to appropriate biblical traditions in non-oppressive ways.

Ruether's method—identifying and re-interpreting biblical liberating principles—seems to me to offer the most hopeful approach for Protestant women. The prophetic principle, however, is only one of the biblical dynamics which correlate with feminist opposition to domination. Russell finds her liberating principle in "God's intention for the mending of all creation" (1985:138). Trible suggests (but does not develop) the creation texts as a basis for a theology of mutuality (cf. 1978:75-105). Likewise, racism and sexism may be considered idolatrous and thus critiqued by the first commandment. The work of these scholars suggests that feminist theologians might explore a variety of biblical dynamics as possible bases for their theological norm.

Third, Trible's work highlights the need for thoroughgoing assessment and restatement of the symbolic dimension of both biblical texts and biblical theology. I have argued that Trible's exploration of particular stories and images leaves the basis of their theological authority unanswered. Nonetheless, her work is extremely important for feminist appropriation of the Bible.

Both Trible and Fiorenza seek to interpret the Bible in ways which give back to women our stories and our past. Such textual and historical storytelling links us to the historic community. Moreover, shared stories serve as a common vocabulary through which contemporary women can be connected to one another. Storytelling shapes identity and is itself an act of resistance.

This symbolic dimension includes not only stories, but also biblical symbols which shape imagination. Trible has lifted up the Old Testament's use of feminine imagery for God. D. T. Setel (1985) and others have studied the Bible's negative use of feminine imagery for sin or judgment.

Because the Bible and biblical theology affect women and men at emotional and imaginative levels, as well as at the level of rational analysis, feminist critique and reinterpretation is as concerned with story and imagery as with principles, injunctions or laws.

Fiorenza insists that feminist theology be worked out in the context of a community of women, and through ongoing dialogue. She is right; moreover, such dialogue would best be carried out in several different directions. There is need for much more conversation among feminist biblical interpreters whose methodologies differ. Ongoing discussion between feminists and traditional male biblical theologians is also needed. Finally, it is imperative that white feminists engage in dialogue with womanists. Indeed, feminists do and should dialogue with all liberation movements. Specific focus on our own liberation is necessary for women. The feminist struggle, however, is grounded in opposition to any form of oppression. Its validity and vitality depend upon commitment to the liberation of all members of the human community.

Recognizing the particularity of any interpretation of the text suggests the importance of ongoing conversations with those from differing vantage points. The goal of approximating one correct explication of biblical theology is replaced by the goal of on-going theological dialogue so that different perspectives can correct and enhance each other. Loss of the hope of arriving at an objective reading may be compensated by conversations which open up the rich diversity of the biblical texts[1].

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Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics:

From Creative Clash to Perichoretic Construction

STEPHEN L. STELL

Carolyn Pressler's paper offers an insightful analysis of the current state of feminist biblical theology. Her illuminating selection and appropriation of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Radford Ruether chart "three main directions of feminist biblical hermeneutics." By careful comparisons and contrasts, she shows how these three "types" represent distinctive, identifiable approaches to biblical theology from a feminist perspective. In this way, her analysis organizes a diversity of perspectives, methods, and theological presuppositions into a coherent constellation, thereby suggesting the initial contours of a hermeneutically-informed feminist biblical theology.

In this paper I would like to suggest, from the particular perspective of systematic theology, certain ways in which Pressler's analyses of biblical theology may serve to support a more unified and comprehensive feminist perspective than she herself envisions. The contours of this proposal will, of course, require the careful scrutiny and critical analysis of feminist scholars themselves to determine its value and delineate its intrinsic weaknesses—not the least of which may be the identification of androcentric tendencies in the historically male-dominated field of systematic theology. Nevertheless, I will be arguing that the impact of feminist hermeneutical insights have the effect of undermining the very foundation of traditional methods and conceptualities in theology.

The power of any typology lies in is its ability to assemble and organize distinct and often disparate alternatives. The valuable heuristic insights which arise from such a typology, however, are always subject to certain dangers and limitations. The primary danger is that important, but nuanced, differences will be overlooked by conforming individual authors to the typological framework. While the organizational structures of a typology simplify a complex field of interests, the various lines of demarcation are always subject to debate. In Pressler's description of these main directions in feminist biblical hermeneutics, then, it may be helpful to investigate the extent to which the proposed paths are three clearly delineated, uni-directional positions or three interrelated trajectories which, like spokes of a wheel, rely upon one another even in their distinctiveness.

In this regard, one must carefully inquire into the boundaries and inner relations which delineate each position. For example, is Fiorenza's approach so narrow that it necessarily creates quandaries for a feminist appropriation of Genesis 1:27 as Pressler suggests on page 16? Fiorenza herself, of course, recognizes the historical impact of this passage as particular cultures interpret and appropriate its meaning.[1] One could certainly argue that in the present historical context Genesis 1:27 not only "allows" but even engenders, in Fiorenza's words, "a vision of Christian women as historical and theological subjects and actors." Moreover this vision of humanity as one of inherent mutuality seems to provide the basic interpretive framework assumed by Fiorenza as she performs her historical inquiries.

This talk of "vision," as well as Fiorenza's insistence on the "historical imagination" (1983:xx), ties Fiorenza much more closely to Trible's emphasis on imaginative retelling than Pressler's typological distinctions seem to allow. From this perspective, one must inquire in more detail into the relationship between Trible's reclaiming of our textual heritage and Fiorenza's reclamation of our historical heritage (Pressler, 1989:16). In Trible, it could be argued that the re-presented "imagery, symbols and stories which call upon the imagination, to inform one's understanding of self and God" (Pressler, 1989:18) are effective precisely because they reflect and engender the solidarity of historical agency and oppression. They are not fairy tales, but creatively resonate with a very real historical context.

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[1] Cf. Fiorenza's discussion of Galatians 3:28; *In Memory of Her* (1983), p. 211.

Conversely, the power of Fiorenza's historical reconstruction includes the implementation of an "historical imagination." This work of the imagination does not draw upon an objective recounting of events, but on a creative reconstruction which specifically addresses women's solidarity in agency and oppression. In other words, as there is an historical interpretive framework assumed by Trible, so there is a creative retelling assumed by Fiorenza. This complex interrelationship of historical traditions and the creative imagination is largely ignored by Pressler's individual depictions of each position.

Such dangers of a too static or narrow construal of the proposed models suggest an inherent limitation for any typology. While typologies provide a structure for organization and interpretation, they do not necessarily tell us anything about the interrelationships of the various models. From this perspective, questions about the exclusion of Genesis 1:27 are actually questions concerning the interconnections of the proposed types. In what ways does Fiorenza preclude other approaches and in what ways augment them?
Without an examination of the inner relationships of these three trajectories, any discussions concerning a comprehensive feminist theology will unavoidably remain obscure. Thus, while Pressler illuminates the basic contours of these three models, she never fully investigates the impact which their similarities or exclusivities may have on the possibility of their collaboration and integration. Are the three main directions of feminist biblical theology contradictory construals or complementary options? Do their overlapping interests and assumptions merely compromise the distinct boundaries separating each position, or do they reflect the beginnings of a unified feminist theology? In short, what does Pressler's

insightful typology tell us about the nature of biblical theology and its comprehensive tasks?

COMPREHENSIVE FEMINIST BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

It is precisely on this issue of a comprehensive feminist biblical theology that Pressler provides us with conflicting analyses. In her Introduction, Pressler characterizes comprehensive biblical theology—a unity which seeks to integrate biblical diversity—as a tenet of traditional western, male theology which feminist perspectives will challenge (1989:12). Likewise in her conclusion (1989:32), Pressler dismisses even the goal of "approximating" a unified correct explication of biblical theology. Instead, on-going theological dialogue must center around the rich diversity of biblical texts "so that different perspectives can correct and enhance each other."

While on-going dialogue and respect for biblical diversity are crucial to any theological endeavor, as is the rejection of any so-called "objective" reading of the text, it is not at all clear that this entails a forfeiture of the goal of approximating a proper explication of biblical theology for a particular time and place. Indeed, Pressler's own goals of "correcting" and "enhancing" (1989:32) would seem to assume an approximating movement toward wholeness and inclusivity, and thus a more "correct," though never complete, explication of biblical theology. In other words, to the extent that one can speak accurately of "correction" and "enhancement," is there not the assumption of a more appropriate perspective toward which such correction and enhancement proceed? Without such an "approximating" goal or vision, one must ask on what basis Pressler can speak of a "rich diversity" in the biblical texts rather than rife discrepancies.

Indeed Pressler's own analysis seems to support—and, at times, assume—such a comprehensive unity. The critical comments which Pressler addresses to each of the three feminist authors suggest that she is drawing upon a larger, more inclusive framework than any single position currently provides. Indeed it is only on the assumption of a more inclusive and coherent perspective that her assessments gain their critical force. A similarly comprehensive outlook is operative, even if unacknowledged, in the individual assessments which Pressler makes—for example, when Trible is described as a "vital part" of the larger work that needs to be done (Pressler, 1989:18).

Pressler, of course, does not ignore the issue of a comprehensive biblical theology. In the final section of her paper (1989:29-32), she enumerates three implications which must guide any comprehensive feminist interpretation of Scripture. These insights are extremely valuable, yet they remain strictly methodological "approaches" which omit any discussion of content or conceptual difficulties in the interrelationship of these three interpretive frameworks. Indeed it is only by avoiding such issues that Pressler can proclaim the beginnings of a comprehensive approach, while simultaneously denying any specifiable content for a comprehensive interpretive context.

Yet, as argued above, a working conception of such a comprehensive interpretive framework is finally unavoidable for anyone concerned with critical analysis, correction, and enhancement of the present interpretive situation. Nowhere is this necessity for comprehensive content and consistency more evident than in the requisite discussion of "authority" as this impinges upon "correct" interpretation. Indeed without elucidating the content of a more appropriate interpretive framework, the discussion of normative principles remains abstract and vague. This is because the very notion of a "norm" entails a comprehensiveness which is able to subject any and every position to its own normative content. Thus Pressler's avoidance of a comprehensive content leaves her discussion of norms both detached and diffuse.

NORMS AND THE COMPREHENSIVE TASK

Pressler appropriates the whole gamut of terms surrounding the issue of normativity—authority, norm, warrant, critical principle, biblical grounding, etc.—without any thorough explication or differentiation of meaning. Moreover, in the course of her analysis of the various positions, there is a bewildering array of authorities cited. Among these are (listed in the order of their appearance): the early Christian model of community; the experience of women struggling for liberation; the Bible as an authoritative prototype; feminism itself; a "remnant theology"; Scripture as a "mirror"; Scripture as a shaper of identity; the Bible as a guide and warrant for retelling scriptural stories; the prophetic principle; the promotion of the full humanity of women; the experience arising from the critical consciousness of imposed androcentric interpretations; a commitment to women's well-being; and an interconnected "variety of biblical dynamics."

The inner relationships among these various expressions of authority are, at best, only partially divulged. Not only is this the case among the full diversity of options, but also within any single example, such as the authority of Scripture. Do the biblical texts represent a theological source, or a norm, or a warrant, or a guide, or some combination of them all? Does it function as a model, a mirror, a shaper of identity, a source of critical principles? What are the inner relationships of these various claims—are they consistent, contradictory, or complementary? In short, what is meant by "biblical authority" in relation to these various norms? Are theological norms to be "correlated with" the Bible, shown to be "congruent with" the Bible, or "grounded in" the Bible? In the course of her paper, Pressler suggests all three without any careful discrimination of their significant differences.

Even in the presentation of particular norms which are cited as especially apt for feminist theology, the interrelationships comprising these norms are left unexplored. Pressler holds up "women's well-being" as an appropriate theological norm, but its relationships to other claims of normativity are not examined. However, this means that even the principle itself is not clearly delineated. Is the norm a "commitment" to women's well-being (1989:21), that is, a norm of intent or purpose? Or is there also a particular content necessary, as Pressler's discussion suggests at points, but does not elaborate. Or is the norm actually the "promotion" of women's well-being, thereby giving normativity a praxis orientation tied to its effective implementation? The choice of any one of these options would give the norm "women's well-being" a distinctive relationship to the various other norms enumerated and thus a significantly different meaning. However, because Pressler does not examine the deeper interrelationships among the myriad norms cited, the discussion remains at a rather abstract and unrefined level.

These tough questions of "authority" and "norms" are not, of course, simply directed towards Pressler's own work. They are questions which plague the whole field of biblical theology, as Pressler herself has so persuasively argued. Whether one can make any sense of these diverse and competing claims to authority—that is, whether one can develop any kind of comprehensive unity in the face of such radical differences—is not a question which any one person or perspective can adequately address. Rather it demands the interdisciplinary interests which a journal such as *Koinonia* is intended to foster and the on-going dialogue to which Pressler exhorts us. From the particular perspective of systematic theology, however, it is precisely these tensions in Pressler's approach to the comprehensive tasks of biblical theology (as cited above) which require special attention.

THE FEMINIST UNDERMINING OF TRADITIONAL THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Many of the tensions evident in Pressler's feminist analysis of biblical hermeneutics may be explored in light of the historical conflicts between "tradition" and "experience" in modern theology. In what sense does Scripture or the tradition constitute a norm? In what sense is women's experience to be taken as authoritative? And how do these two fit together—through combat, congruence, correlation, or one somehow grounding the other?

Pressler's own approach to this issue adopts a very polarized view of this relationship between experience and tradition, a view which is in fact closely aligned with the androcentric principles of western, male theology. In this discussion between feminism and traditional biblical theology, both sides separate tradition and experience into two independent categories, but weigh them very differently. From this point on, however, theology necessarily becomes a struggle among competing normative conceptions trying to gain ascendancy. There is little room for dialogue or constructive interaction because both sides have presupposed a dichotomous independence.

In such a polarized interpretive framework, traditional male theology seeks to retain the priority of tradition, especially as given in Scripture, over the individual and culturally diverse expressions of experience. Indeed, when the integrity of experience is made independent of tradition, western androcentrism goes virtually unchallenged. This is because the separation of tradition and experience precludes any internal recognition that the current theological tradition has itself been shaped and defined by a purely patriarchal experience. Thus apart from the insistence upon an inherent, integral relation between experience and tradition, male-traditioned theology will continue to affirm its own inviolable sanctity. Ignorant of the effects of its own patriarchal experiences and impervious to the impact of women's liberating and oppressive experiences, the illusory "objectivity" of this male-oriented interpretation of tradition continues unabated. Any subjection of scriptural precepts to experiential influences will thus continue to be seen as an uncontrollable corruption of Scripture which will invariably end up sacrificing the historic norms of the tradition to the relativities of cultural time, place, and community.

Pressler's astute hermeneutical insights undercut this traditional argument in almost every respect. Yet in violation of her own feminist insights, it seems to me, she holds to the polarization of experience and tradition—thereby accepting the assumptions of traditional western, male theology—while trying to reverse the priority assigned to each. The authority of women's own experience, Pressler insists, must be given "an integrity *independent* of Scripture or tradition" (Pressler, 1989:24, emphasis mine). The intent, of course, is to free women's experience from the domination of an androcentric tradition and then to give it a critical force in relation to that tradition.

The hermeneutical question which must be raised, however, concerns the precise nature of this relation to the tradition and the consequent character of this critical challenge. Are tradition and experience to be pitted against one another as independent opposing forces? If so, the only way to be completely free from the oppressive patriarchal tradition is to leave it behind.[2] This is because any granting of an independent integrity to tradition and experience ensures that the tradition—patriarchy and all—cannot be transformed or overcome, but only "co-related," that is, marginally altered by the external, independent considerations of women's experience. This is, in effect, engaging male theology on its own androcentric terms.

There is, however, an alternative approach. Feminist insights may rightfully be seen to challenge the independent integrity of both tradition and experience, thereby forcing male theology and the patriarchal tradition to drop its claims of exclusive normativity. While Pressler speaks of an independent integrity of experience, she immediately proceeds to insist (quite persuasively) that "the Bible itself informs women's experience." Yet on this very basis, how can this experience be "independent of" Scripture and tradition? Is there not an important interaction, indeed an integral relation, between tradition and experience which needs to be explored? Experience, then, does not have an independent integrity, but a relational integrity always informed by the tradition in which one stands.

This importance of tradition as an inextricable element in the experiential bases of feminist theology is matched by the similar impact of experience on tradition. Thus one must acknowledge an experiential element which is integral to (not independent from) any appropriation of tradition. This is especially evident in

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[2] Leaving the tradition behind is an option, and some feminists have chosen it. But even this, of course, would not be leaving "tradition" as such behind, but only one complex of traditions for another. But this is precisely the option "revisionists" like Pressler are attempting to avoid.

Ruether's application of the prophetic tradition. As Pressler rightly notes, "the prophetic principle is not a set of ideas, but a dynamic process running throughout Israel's history, and requiring continual discernment of God's liberating will for new situations" (Pressler, 1989:19). As a "dynamic process," then, the prophetic tradition is unalterably an experienced tradition. Moreover, as it requires "continual discernment," recognition and interpretation of the prophetic principle unavoidably entails an act of the creative imagination. Thus this particular tradition can only be rightly understood when experience and creativity are integral to its very conception.

Failure to recognize these inherent interrelationships among experience, tradition and the creative imagination have led many feminists to abandon the tradition as singularly sexist. Yet if the above hermeneutical insights are correct, tradition itself always has an inextricable experiential component and is thus intrinsically open to creative transformation on the basis of women's experience (even though in the current socio-political situation this can be very difficult to achieve in practice). From this perspective, to leave the tradition because of its traditional patriarchal structure is to accept the androcentric definition of tradition, rather than seeing the ways in which feminist insights redefine tradition at its very core.

A PERICHORETIC WHOLE: HERMENEUTICAL INSIGHTS

These mutual relationships among tradition, experience, and the creative imagination are crucial to consider if one wishes to investigate the possibility of a comprehensive biblical theology utilizing these three feminist models. Fiorenza is clearest on what is required of feminist theology at this point. Citing Thomas Kuhn (1983:xxi), she argues that feminist biblical theology demands a new "paradigm shift," a comprehensive interpretive framework which can encompass coherently the broad scope of feminist interests and affirmations. The focus is not simply on a methodological approach to the whole of Scripture, but on a transformed structure of interpretation which recasts our understanding of the biblical tradition, redefines the nature of human experience, and reshapes the creative insights of our social location. This is, of course, a far more radical task than Pressler's enumeration of certain "ways" in which feminists can and do engage in "aspects" of biblical theology (Pressler, 1989:29).

In moving towards this paradigm shift, Pressler's typology provides a wealth of data and a useful structure for interpreting the basic interrelationships which will constitute such a new interpretive framework. If the discipline of systematic theology is to be a useful partner in dialogue with feminist biblical theology, it seems to me that it may be most serviceable by contributing to the task of discerning these interrelationships and attempting to organize them into patterns of increasing coherence and inclusivity.

A careful analysis of the systematic interrelationships of Pressler's typological model suggests a serious challenge to the integrity of traditional biblical theology. As Pressler notes, recognition of the importance of social location by feminist and other liberation theologians challenges any claims to a purely "objective," timeless, or neutral theological construction. All interpretations, even the most obvious and trusted, utilize the creative imagination for the particular emphases and conclusions which are drawn from a host of available data, warrants, and background theories. What this means for the very conceptualization of "tradition" and "experience" in theological hermeneutics, however, has not been fully considered in Pressler's project.

In the first place, if all interpretations come to us through the filter of quite particular interests and investments, then there is really no such thing as an autonomous "tradition" or an independent "experience." Pressler writes: "I do not think that we can recognize and reject sexism, or claim the Bible's liberating visions for women without turning to our own experience" (1989:24). This is certainly true, but it should be expanded into a more inclusive hermeneutical principle. We cannot claim anything at all about the biblical tradition or its meaning for us today without utilizing our experience. All questions, all assumptions, all interpretations are grounded in the historical experience of the interpreter. The dynamism that Pressler correctly associates with the prophetic principle is in fact integral to all tradition. There is no such thing as tradition in itself; all appropriated tradition is experienced tradition.

In the second place, this hermeneutical insight applies in equal force to the understanding of "experience." There is no "experience" per se. All experience is traditioned experience, filtered through the interpretive framework of one's operative traditions. Pressler correctly perceives this and explicitly affirms it in relation to Ruether and Fiorenza (Pressler, 1989:25). But this interrelationship is not so evident when she speaks of experience as a norm over and against the scriptural tradition. If all experience is traditioned experience, in what sense can experience serve as an independent authority in the critical appropriation of the biblical texts? It seems to me that the continuing work of feminist biblical hermeneutics should build upon this integral relationship between experience and tradition—both the relationships of conflict and the relationships of complementarity—rather than engaging in the perennial battles of exclusivity which characterize the western, androcentric paradigm of theological domination. For this juxtaposition of experience and tradition as separate "poles" constituting theological understanding would seem, in reality, to be in contradiction with the very insights derived from the emerging feminist paradigm.

Traditional theological approaches have promulgated the autonomy of these poles and solidified their existence through the dominant method of correlation. The current arguments in hermeneutical theology (such as those between the so-called Yale and Chicago schools) concern the priority which is to be given to each of these poles, and thus whether "absorption" or "correlation" better describes the proper method for theological understanding. Either way, the ravages of a patriarchal tradition retain their force, mildly challenged by or correlated with the experience of women, but never utterly transformed into a new paradigm of human mutuality.

Feminist hermeneutical insights, however, call for a rejection of this dichotomy of experience and tradition. The tradition is unavoidably an experienced tradition, experienced in terms of both liberation and oppression. It is not a question, then, of feminists imposing their experience upon the scriptural tradition. Rather that experience is itself integral to any human appropriation of that tradition. In this sense, experience does not stand in judgment upon the tradition—tradition itself *is* experienced, in some cases as liberating and in others as oppressive. Indeed tradition has always been *experienced* tradition; though it has not always been recognized as such, nor has women's experience been included explicitly therein.

Similarly, in a new feminist paradigm, theological insights need not be won by bringing the challenges of the scriptural tradition in confrontation with women's experience. Experience is *traditioned* experience. And so, as Fiorenza affirms, when Christian women *experience* the oppression of a patriarchal system or the possibilities of liberation from it, this experience does not simply stand in contradiction to the tradition, but is at least partly engendered by it. Experience *is* traditioned experience, and for Christians it is, and always has been, an experience traditioned by the Scriptures. The crucial difference is that now the experiences thus shaped by tradition are consciously broadened to include women's experience of liberation and oppression in its relation to the tradition itself.

In the third place, the insights of feminist biblical hermeneutics also offer a forum in which the actual relations of experience, tradition, and the *creative imagination* can be recognized in their appropriate interactions. The creative imagination so central to theological understanding never operates unconstrained or on its own authority; it is always nurtured, shaped, and finally expressed in relation to one's experienced tradition and traditioned experience. Tradition is indeed a "handing over;" but this handing over is a dynamic process, an experienced tradition, which demands our creative appropriation. Experience is never autonomous or unmediated; it is always traditioned experience, always imaginatively created in light of our acceptance or rejection of traditional assumptions about reality.

It would seem that, above all, feminist biblical hermeneutics must be faithful to this perceived interrelation of tradition, experience, and creative imagination. For the transformation of traditional biblical theology and the eventual emergence of a full-blown feminist paradigm depend on continued hermeneutical investigation into these mutual interrelationships. The emerging feminist paradigm must therefore not succumb to the temptation of a secure, but illusory independence of experience in its interactions with tradition or creative reinterpretation. Neither experience, tradition, nor creative inspiration can claim an individual (versus a relational) integrity nor, thus, an independent authority. Rather each one must be interpreted and critically assessed in light of the others.[3] This is not just a question of "balance" or judicious mediation of opposing forces. It is rather demanded by what feminists have correctly perceived as the very nature of a dynamic experience, tradition, and creative imagination.

This dynamic triune structure, if it is accurate, must accordingly be applied to the positions and emphases within Pressler's typology. In this regard, there is a sense in which one may discern an emphasis on tradition in Ruether's prophetic principle, an emphasis on women's experience in Fiorenza's program, and an emphasis on the imagination in Trible's creative re-telling. Yet if the above analyses of experience, tradition, and creative imagination are correct, then each one of these feminist positions, to the extent that it is coherent and persuasive, must be interpenetrated with the insights and emphases of the other two. Pressler has herself begun some of this process in her comparative assessments. Yet her insistence on an independent, rather than a relational, integrity has compromised her efforts. The full interrelationships of tradition, experience and creative imagination have been lost, and thus so have the critical bases for analysis and construction.

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[3] Cf. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza's development of "reflective equilibrium," in *Foundational Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1985).

PERICHORETIC CONSTRUCTION: HERMENEUTICAL INSIGHTS AND THEOLOGICAL NORMS

If one holds to these integral interrelationships of experience, tradition and the creative imagination, the resulting feminist insights radically alter the traditional conceptions of biblical authority and theological norms. No longer is it a question of the authority of Scripture over against the authority of women's experience. The two are integrally and inextricably related. Nor does the suggestion of human creativity in theology necessarily compromise the scriptural or experiential dimension of interpretation. If interpretation is an open and creative process, then one's norm for interpretation must be comparably dynamic in character.

While Pressler has indeed pointed to this interrelational notion of authority in her suggestion of the dialogical or personal character of biblical authority, from the point of view of systematic theology, this does not go far enough in the direction of understanding the experienced tradition and the traditioned experience of the Scriptures as indeed an encounter with God—it is a personal authority stemming from God's own person; it is a dialogical authority which consists of the address and response of God's own Word. Whereas in the past, God's authority has been tied to certain parts of the tradition or special instances of inspiration, the insights of feminist theology suggest that no discussion of authority can avoid the inherent interconnections of experience, tradition and creative insight. The question this raises, however, is how we are to understand these interconnections in relation to God. Can we speak about ultimate authority resting in God when that authority includes very particular cultural experiences, oppressive and liberating aspects of the tradition, and diverse uses and expressions of the creative imagination?

In attempting to address such questions—questions which are indeed integral to both the feminist critique of traditional biblical theology and the feminist attempt to forge its own hermeneutical paradigm—I want to suggest that the feminist emphasis on a dynamic, interacting norm can perhaps best be served by showing its integral relationship to the dynamic triune God. It is in relation to this Trinitarian God and the divine triune activity that the authoritative interrelationships of experience, tradition and the creative imagination become clear. This approach, of course, can only be sketched in its barest outlines, but even such a cursory explication may serve to stimulate further development.

First, as noted above, there is a triune structure for theological understanding based upon the hermeneutical interrelationships of experience, tradition, and the creative imagination. Second, each of these three contributors to understanding is itself seen to be constituted by an internal triune structure. The individual identity of tradition or experience or the creative imagination is not founded upon an independent integrity, but a dynamic relationality defined by its vital interaction with the other two. Tradition is, in its very own nature, an experienced tradition, interpreted through an imaginative construction; experience is, in its own relational integrity, not an independent experience, but a traditioned experience creatively and imaginatively interpreted; and the creative imagination is not an independent faculty operating on neutral ground but is itself directed towards and influenced by the dynamism of a traditioned experience and an experienced tradition.

Finally, a systematic theologian would want to go further to suggest that this hermeneutical interpenetration of experience, tradition, and the creative imagination must be explicated in terms of God's activity in creating human experience, shaping human traditions, and inspiring human creativity. In other words, the triune structure of human understanding must be related to the Trinitarian structure of God's gracious activity for humanity. From this perspective, human experience or, more specifically, women's experience of oppression and liberation gains its authority by its intrinsic connection to God's grace. While similar arguments need to be made for the gracious Trinitarian structure of tradition and the creative imagination, the centrality of experience for feminist theology and its controversial status among contemporary theologians make it the ideal test case for discerning God's normative authority within our hermeneutical humanity.

THE TRINITARIAN STRUCTURE OF FEMINIST EXPERIENTIAL NORMS

Women's experience, of course, is included in human experience—though there are many different kinds of human experience—and, as such, it is uniquely connected with the creative work of God. For in creation, God has endowed our humanity with a distinctive character which, in turn, provides a definitive context affecting all experience and understanding. Human finitude, mortality, sensual perception, sexual mutuality, sociality, personal reflection, the ability to remember the past and long for a future, all the various dimensions of human existence, although experienced in many different ways according to many different interpretive frameworks, nevertheless provide certain basic parameters which shape what it means to be human and what it means to be related to God. Accordingly, the nature of human understanding necessarily builds upon this created experience, even though it can build in quite diverse ways. As constructed upon this created humanity, then, experience is always an open and participatory reality, i.e., one which is constituted by the historical interrelationships in our created world which shape who we are and the nature of our existence.

Yet the inherent openness of God's created existence means that this experiential substratum may be conceived according to a virtually endless number of interpretations, many of them mutually exclusive. Thus all particular experiences presuppose some tradition of interpretation—that indeed is what human experience means. Moreover, it is precisely the nature of the tradition appropriated which determines the experience itself from the midst of possible alternatives. Thus Christian experience is ultimately defined, not only in accordance with God's work in creation, but also in relation to God's presence in the Judeo-Christian tradition, centering, of course, on Jesus Christ.

Yet the character of Christian experience is not thereby encompassed by the conjunction of created experience and Christian tradition. This is not only because there are multiple interpretations of both Christian experience and tradition which require some means for choosing among them, but also because Christian traditions and experiences are unavoidably interconnected with other traditions and experiences stemming from related interpretive frameworks and plausibility structures. For this reason, the proper understanding of Christian experience requires some insight, some creative discovery or inspiration in order to choose among the various traditions and their corresponding experiences, as well as to discern (or to create) a pattern of interrelationships in which the multiplicity of interpretive frameworks can be fitted together. One must discern the true traditions from the oppressive ones; one must ascertain which experiences are of God and which are not; one must faithfully and creatively bring together all our interpretive frameworks and plausibility structures as these relate to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In other words, Christian interpretation of experience requires not only God's work in creation and God's historical activity in the tradition, but God's current presence and illumination of our understanding.

From this perspective, the affirmation of human experience as an authoritative guide to theological understanding relies upon an irreducibly Trinitarian process: Christian experience is created by God, shaped through God, and fulfilled in God. Human comprehension of the divine is thus possible on the basis which God has provided—human experience as God created it to be, human tradition conformed to the experienced presence of God in Jesus Christ, human creativity and insight inspired by the experience of God's Spirit living within us. On this Trinitarian basis, feminist experience can quite properly claim the authority of God's own truth as it creatively appropriates and critiques a purely androcentric experienced tradition and traditioned experience.

Not only does this Trinitarian structure of experience identify a proper norm for theological understanding, but it also illuminates the source of corruption and the only available means for correction. An experience which is intrinsically dependent upon tradition will unavoidably be perverted by traditions of patriarchal domination. A tradition which is ultimately dependent upon our experiences for its interpretation will be distorted by human experiences of domination and oppression as surely as it is enriched by experiences of God's liberation. A creative inspiration which conjoins experience and tradition will be vitiated by all such distortions of our experienced traditions and our traditioned experiences.

This devastating circle of distortion precludes any simple reliance upon tradition or experience as authoritative norms. Rather it forces us to seek a dynamic normative structure—indeed a Trinitarian structure—which calls upon the full resources of God's grace in our created experience, our Christian tradition, and our creative imaginations. All experiences must be creatively interpreted and challenged by the heart of the tradition of God's presence with humanity in Jesus Christ. All traditions must be creatively interpreted and challenged by the fullness of human experience as God has created it and is working to fulfill it. All creative theological constructions must be interpreted and challenged by the critical appropriation of traditioned experience and experienced tradition.

This, it seems to me, is precisely what feminist theology is doing—creatively interpreting women's experience of oppression and liberation in light of the liberating reality of Jesus Christ, and creatively interpreting the tradition surrounding Jesus Christ in light of women's experience of liberation and oppression. The hope for an increasingly accurate and comprehensive understanding of biblical theology comes from these mutually critical and mutually enlightening norms of God's work in creation, God's active shaping of human traditions, and God's promised presence through the Holy Spirit as we faithfully and creatively seek our human fulfillment in conformity to God's unfolding Trinitarian life.

Reflections on Teaching the Bible in a Sexist World

CAROL AND ERNIE HESS

Carolyn Pressler argues that a “feminist perspective challenges biblical theologians to appropriate biblical texts in liberating ways while recognizing their oppressive aspects,” (Pressler, 1989:23). This challenge addressed to biblical theologians is also relevant to practical theologians. Practical theologians, those engaged in the process of thinking theologically about ecclesial practice, are grappling with the issues raised by feminist Christians—issues that impinge critically upon the ministry of the church. The key challenge for the church is: How can we preach, teach and study biblical texts in liberating ways while confronting their oppressive aspects? How can we listen for the Word of God in a way that enables us to confess the church’s (our) sinfulness while freeing us to move toward repentance?

We would like to reflect upon this challenge from an educational perspective. We will specifically address the issue of how Christians can teach the Bible in a way that is faithful to its life-giving center. We have two primary concerns in approaching this project: First, we wish to take seriously feminist critiques of both the content and method of the church’s theological study. Feminists are attempting to move us beyond “patriarchal” modes of both thinking and doing. Thus, we will deal with the ways in which questions of biblical authority impinge upon the educational ministry of the church. Second, we will consider the dynamics of the educational situation in terms of the learner, the teacher, and the overall context.

Feminist (and other) theologians have drawn our attention to the fact that no understanding of biblical authority is value-free or neutral. Theology is an engaged enterprise; we look at the Bible through lenses that have been shaped by our personal, social, cultural, and political histories. David Kelsey, in his work *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (1975), illuminates the ways in which experience, church practice and imagination all contribute to the process by which individuals and communities construe biblical authority. The key question, as Kelsey perceives it, is not whether or not scripture is authoritative in the church. Scripture is authoritative; it is used in the community in ways that shape and transform persons' identities in decisive ways. The key issue is: in what way is it authoritative?

There is no "standard model" of authority, that is authority as a quality of the text alongside which the theologian must merely translate its application. Kelsey helpfully uncovers various ways in which biblical authority is "imaginatively construed" by theologians (and we might add, by teachers, learners, Bible study leaders, et al.).

> Theologians do not appeal to scripture-as-such to help authorize their theological proposals. In the concrete practice of doing theology, they decide on some aspect or, more exactly, some pattern in scripture to which they appeal. . . . Not the text as such, but the text-construed-as-a-certain-kind-of-whole is appealed to. (1975:103)

The texts construed-as-a-certain-kind-of-whole function as a theologian's "working canon" to which he or she appeals in authorizing theological proposals. Despite claims to the contrary, Kelsey's careful analysis shows us that all theologians operate with such an explicit or implicit "working canon." A theologian construes the biblical texts by means of an imaginative decision in which a certain pattern (a "wholeness") is discerned within the texts.

How is this pattern discerned? For the theologians that Kelsey has examined in his book (and so we would argue for feminist theologians as well), it is through an imaginative act in which a judgment is "made about how to characterize the mode in which God is present among the faithful" (1975:160). This imaginative judgment provides a discrimen which guides theology (and practical theology) in its work. This discrimen is a metaphorical picture in which a sense of the mode of God's presence in the church *and* a corresponding biblical aspect or pattern are held together as mutual coefficients.

> In short: at the root of a theological position there is an imaginative act in which a theologian tries to catch up in a single metaphorical judgment the full complexity of God's presence in, through, and over against the activities comprising the church's common life and which, in turn, provides the discrimen against which the theology criticizes the church's current forms of speech and life, and determines the peculiar "shape" of the "position." (1975:163)

To sum up, the theologian stands within a particular faith community which already believes in (and experiences) God's presence to it "in, through, and over against the activities comprising the church's common life"; important among these activites are the various uses of scripture in the community's life and practice. By an imaginative judgment, she or he comes up with a way to characterize the mode of God's presence in the church. This judgment includes a certain construal of scripture, an ascribing of a "wholeness" to it through the recognition of one master pattern among the many possibilities as the medium of God's presence. Thus, it is not experience alone, nor the Bible alone, that functions as authority (as an independent and self-sufficient norm), but both as they are brought together as mutual coefficients in the church's life and practice.

This makes sense of what feminist theologians of the type that Pressler calls "reformist" are struggling to do. They are attempting to hold the two *foci* of which Kelsey speaks together. As Pressler shows us, the feminist critical principle can be understood as an articulation of the experience of the presence of God *pro nobis* in the midst of the struggle of women for full humanity in the face of oppression. This is correlated by Ruether with a particular biblical pattern—that of the prophetic principle or dynamic. For Fiorenza, it is the reconstructed biblical history of women's struggle (with God's help) against oppression that provides the authoritative biblical pattern. It is important, we believe, to recognize this rootedness of the feminist critical principle in a community's experience of God *pro nobis*, an experience which is not independent of the biblical tradition, but at least partly constituted by it (cf. Pressler's comments about Fiorenza and Ruether on pp. 13-16; 19f). It is this experience of God's presence that provides the positive counterpoint which allows the facing of human sinfulness (of which androcentrism is a potent example) as embodied in certain biblical texts and in our own practice.

The claim that theologians do and must exercise an imaginative judgment does not mean that anything goes and that all judgments are equally valid. A Christian theologian does her work in the context of a Christian faith community and this sets three major limits on her imaginative proposals, again according to Kelsey. They are: (1) the conditions necessary for discourse to be intelligible, (2) cultural limits as to what can be seriously imagined, and (3) the double structure of tradition. The first limit concerns such things as coherence and noncontradiction and requires no further comment. The second limit is fluid and not absolute. Feminist theologians must of necessity stretch this limit given the history of cultural and social oppression of women. The task of the theologian (or Christian educator) may in fact be to expand the horizon of what can be seriously imagined in any given socio-cultural situation. The power of the gospel to liberate depends precisely upon this capability to overturn the status quo and reimage the world as God's world.

Kelsey's final limit is based upon Tillich's analysis of tradition as a temporal sequence of "situations". Every situation has a double structure in both a horizontal and a vertical direction.

> Horizontally, each one has two poles, a community with its characteristic forms of speech and action in dialectical relationship with a presence (or "power" or "event") that is experienced as "coming to" them and "over against" them; and vertically, each "sitututation" in "tradition". . . is somehow grounded in Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection. (1975:175)

The life and practices of the community are in dialectical tension, both horizontally, with a judging and confirming presence of God, and vertically, with the community's founding event, which in the case of the Christian church is Jesus Christ. The implication of this limit is that:

> . . . the very structure of "tradition" rules out any construal of the mode of God's presence that collapses the "over against": that stresses the present "situation" at the expense of its basis in Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ at the expense of the present "situation". (1975:175)

Our conclusion from this third limit is that feminist theology must be careful to articulate its critical principle in relation both to an understanding of the mode of God's presence in the church today and in relation to God's presence in the originating events testified to in the Bible, primarily Jesus Christ.

Our discussion of Kelsey helps us to understand that the role of experience in shaping biblical interpretation does not undermine biblical authority; rather it nuances the notion in an illuminating way. Biblical authority no longer need be looked at as an absolutist, objectivist principle, but can be accepted as a dynamic process integral to human experience and ecclesial practice. This shifts the task of biblical theology away from "grasping *the* correct reading and ordering of biblical texts" toward critically engaging human experience and the Christian tradition in a creative way. We thus will still function under the authority of the particular patterns we recognize as authoritative in scripture. However, we will do so with a little less hubris and a lot more critical examination of our presuppositions.

An important part of the educational task, then, would be to help persons to name their own experience of God in relationship to the scriptures. Our response when confronted in an educational situation with a diversity of understandings of a particular biblical text would be to gently call people to unpack their understanding in relationship to their experience, the patterns in scripture to which they are appealing, the relationship of those patterns to others, and finally, to the consequences of their understanding for their own life and that of the community of faith.

What does this mean for ecclesial education? It means that we foster practical theological thinking as a way of church life; it means that we overcome the "transmission" model of education whereby we feed established "truths" into the receptacle minds of church participants. Conversation, experience and practice are now seen as revelatory sources; imparted truths are seen as starting points for thought and action rather than simplistic pronouncements that truncate theological reflection. In practical theological thinking the Christian tradition is taught as a means of reflecting on church practice—within the community and the world. While experience is brought to bear on the tradition, the tradition in turn critiques experience and calls the church to greater faithfulness. The inescapable nature of the hermeneutical circle is brought to critical awareness. In this way the Christian community is given the "power to name" present experience and claim ownership over and responsibility for its practice.

It is important that this approach to ecclesial education avoids becoming an educational idealism. While raising consciousness through practical theological thinking is crucial for human liberation, it is not easily done. Nor does it solve all church problems. In education we are dealing with human beings who, as we have said, are shaped, and, to various degrees bound, by their particularity. More than that, we are also dealing with the human condition of radical insecurity. We cannot approach education without evaluating the situation of the human learner.

THE ADULT LEARNER, THE TEACHER, AND THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Philosophers, psychologists and theologians have for some time been exposing the basic insecurity or anxiety that pervades the human being. Reinhold Niebuhr, in his classic *Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941) vividly portrayed humanity as precariously balanced between its creaturely status and its seemingly infinite potential. As Niebuhr sees it, the anxiety and insecurity occasioned by human finitude propels humanity into one of two defensive postures: either toward the assertion of the self over the world and other people or the subsuming of the self under others. While this scheme doesn't fully uncover all of the dynamics of oppression, it does suggest that most forms of domination and some forms of submission are rooted in an attempt of the self to defensively secure itself in the face of the threat of nothingness or nonbeing. Thus, the order created by human culture and social roles, including sex roles of domination and submission, stands as an existentially charged bulkwork (i.e. a "sacred canopy"—Berger, 1967) against the potential chaos of nothingness. The only way, in Niebuhr's view, to break these destructive and oppressive patterns, which may feed on each other, is to find one's security and destiny in the love and forgiveness of a gracious and empowering God. God's mercy modifies our understanding of personal power and God's Spirit channels our restlessness into appropriate forms of assertiveness and servanthood.

This human condition is something that cannot be ignored in the educational situation. We must recognize our basic human defensiveness and insecurity, teachers and learners alike. In confronting issues of biblical authority and sexism, we are faced with the fact that standard views of biblical authority and traditional patterns of human relationships provide insecure beings with an orderly universe. Merely raising consciousness about these issues will more likely generate defensiveness than inspiration. We all have beliefs, habits and practices that we protect almost involuntarily; they matter so much. How do we allow ourselves and others to be transformed without shaking our universes so completely that we harden and fix our positions instead of softening and opening them?

The first response we would like to offer to this question is hardly new. The church's responsibility toward insecure people is to offer the Word of grace and forgiveness. Human beings require a center before they can become open and critical; a critical principle must be grounded in a stabilizing Presence. While most human centers become idolatrous and oppressive, the center of God's love revealed in the Gospel with its vision for liberation and wholeness is iconoclastic. However, if the Word of grace is presented as "cheap grace" rather than a confrontative and repentence-invoking grace, then it intensifies rather than alleviates human self-securing and defensiveness.

Our second response to this question concerns the context that corresponds to this content of education. In Christian education, then, the Story of Jesus Christ, his life, crucifixion, and resurrection, are central. But, this story is not mere data to be imposed upon others. Rather, it forms the basis for the learning situation. We engage in education as a community that exists under grace—teachers and students alike. We are not trying to earn our salvation by memorizing answers or doing good deeds (though we will do both); we are already accepted, and this gives us the freedom to explore the deeper meanings and implications of our faith. It gives us the power to truly know and freely act.

The assumption of grace and redemption is most powerfully manifest when it is embodied. The educational situation implies a promise: teachers are expected to bring some kind of gift to the learner. While we reject the transmission model, we cannot deny the political nature of education; teachers are influencing others in significant ways. This must be acknowledged with both integrity and humility. Forgiveness becomes a key activity of education. All participants, especially teachers, must be able to confess and be forgiven for both the shortcomings created by their social location and also for their mistakes, defenses, self-protectiveness and lack of sensitivity. When self-righteousness precludes repentance, oppression is deep-seated indeed.

This means that those in the role of teacher must be ready to become the learner. They must be willing not only to admit and learn from their mistakes and miseducative actions, but they must also be willing to receive insights and wisdom from those in the learner role. The distinctions between teachers and learners is softened as practical theological thinking promotes conversation and dialogue. The more that forgiveness, grace and humility operate in the educational situation, the more individuals are freed to seek truth and confront their falsehoods.

This has many educational ramifications. Persons in authority positions should listen to and respect the voices of those without official authority. This may mean the seeking out and hearing of those who have been marginalized by the present social situation. It means entering into solidarity with oppressed persons by actively relating to them rather than merely ruminating about them. While feminists point to the need for males to be attuned to and even step aside for women, this point extends to all situations of hierarchy. The liberation of the oppressed can only occur if concrete steps are taken to incarnate that liberation in the life of the church.

This relationship between grace and freedom enables education to become more conversational. Edward Farley (1966) describes such open, grace centered education as education "in the Spirit." It is education that is based on freedom rather than fear; it is open to renewal and struggle because it is grounded in God rather than ourselves. Farley opposes this to education "in the flesh" which is one-way and rigid—always afraid of conflict and contradiction. Education in the spirit can embrace conflict because it is after truth, not control. Education in the Spirit can deal with human complexity instead of finding refuge in oversimplification and one-dimensionality. Scripture can then be appreciated for its multifacetedness as well as recognized for its ambiguity. We can stop trying to "crack the code" of Scripture and begin living in a vital and dynamic relationship to its mystery. This means that there is much room for mutuality and dialogue and less need for domination.

This emphasis on complexity further suggests that we need to move beyond the current dichotomization between "patriarchy" and concern for women's welfare. The result of this dichotomy is that everything that promotes liberation is associated with feminism and everything that oppresses is labeled patriarchal. Conversely, if the Bible is understood to be "hopelessly patriarchal," its liberating center is obscured and it is denounced *in toto*. Feminists need to confront the hierarchical and oppressive aspects of their own thought; males need to reclaim for themselves aspects of feminism which are not opposed to, but rather integral to, what it means to be male in God's world.

This vision of education requires more responsibility on the part of everyone involved. One can neither sit back and passively receive teaching, nor can one merely package a ready-to-use lesson plan; for the purpose is not merely to know about God, Scripture, the world, or ourselves from a standpoint outside of these things. The purpose is to become truly engaged in the process of looking at ourselves truthfully and responding to the world with integrity.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

From the above theological and educational reflections, we would like to propose some implications for teaching the Bible in ways that uncover sexism and look to the future of God's liberating wholeness.

1. First, our goal as Christian educators is not to undermine or destroy biblical authority, but to nuance the notion, to show its complexity. Kelsey's analysis helpfully does this. The standard,

"translation" model does need to be undermined, but only as other options for biblical authority are set forth, options which explicitly reflect the interrelationship between ecclesial practices, the experience of God's presence, and biblical patterns.

2. We need to provide a place for persons to "name their present action". This requires the type of context spoken of above, one of grace, forgiveness, humility, dialogue, and freedom in the Spirit. The "naming of present action" includes the bringing to conscious articulation, as much as possible, one's presuppositions, beliefs, practices, and experiences. Such "present action" then needs to be placed in dialogue with the Christian Story and Vision (cf. Thomas Groome's "shared praxis approach" to Christian religious education). The questions which our present situation raises are given a voice, as are the questions which the Gospel presents to us. The outcome is not predetermined, but is played out in the freedom of the Spirit.

3. It is important, however, to lift up the educational impact of actual practice, rather than mere talk about practice. For example, the actual practice of having ordained women preachers, teachers, and pastors, has the potential to open persons up to a conversion from sexism more effectively than countless theoretical discussions. When a man unexpectedly hears the Word of God in a convictional way through the speech of a woman preacher, that experience of the presence of God can lead to a reinterpretation and revaluation of a biblical text such as I Corinthians 14:34, "women should keep silence in the churches." In line with Kelsey's analysis, such a reinterpretation has a validity and does not represent a loss of biblical authority.

Ruether has made the helpful observation that in her experience, conversion from sexism requires entering into real solidarity with women, most often solidarity with a particular woman who is pursuing her own liberation (1983:190). The larger educational point is that education needs to include actual experiences which build solidarity between men and women, whites and people of color, rich and poor, young and old. Dialogue is essential, but so is work (and worship) together. Letty Russell's call for "growth in partnership" (1981) is a helpful way to describe this.

Here it is also appropriate to mention the importance of the practice of the teacher. People need positive examples of vital faith on the other side of the critique of their present faith stance or present view of the Bible. Whether that critique comes from traditional historical-critical scholarship or from the deeper ideological critique of the feminists and other liberation theologians, students are helped in truly facing the conflict by a teacher who embodies a vital and passionate faith that has some continuity with the faith, belief, or understanding that is being challenged. The ideal is a teacher who can deal with the full complexity of reality, without losing the capacity for effective (and compassionate) action and prayer.

4. Our final point concerns the importance of the imagination in transforming persons' understandings. Here is where we have found Trible's work to have tremendous educational power. Through her retelling of biblical stories in *Texts of Terror* (1984), stories reflecting both holiness and horror, she evokes powerful feelings and images in the reader. By focusing our attention and imagination on these stories, a mirror is directed towards us which implicitly calls us to repentance, and pushes us toward a more complex understanding of the authority of the Bible. It is precisely her refusal to go beyond retelling to a comprehensively argued biblical theology that disarms many of the defenses of the reader. The reader is left directly facing these biblical texts, and what he or she sees is not a pretty sight. A choice must be made, for or against the world of the text. It is in the face of such a conflict that repentance and transformation can take place.

There are many other important ways in which the imagination must be brought into play in the teaching of the Bible for liberation. Drama, role-play, art, and the use of media are all important methods for the task of reimaging the world and self, the whole field of human relationships, in light of the Gospel. And this is the task called for in teaching the Bible in a sexist world.

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Sacred Texts and Feminist Hermeneutics

KIMBERLY PARSONS CHASTAIN

As Pressler correctly notes, a particular problem faced by Protestant theologians is the doctrine of *sola scriptura.* The Bible has been identified since Luther as a sacred text in the Protestant tradition, holding unique authority and demanding special consideration. Within the Bible the church claims to find its identity; its heritage is rooted in the biblical text. For Protestants, the authority of the Bible is exclusive, and we must reckon with it. This is especially a problem for liberation thinkers, including feminists, because there are traditions in scripture which seem to support oppression and oppressive thought.

Theologians in the constructive and practical disciplines often confront the Bible directly and in much the same way as the biblical theologian, as sacred text for theology. Historical theologians, for the most part, do not; our enterprise is often concerned with the Bible more indirectly. Our focus is usually on such issues as the problem of scriptural interpretation in history, issues of canon formation, the history of exegesis, and the way biblical images have been used in history.

Nevertheless, I am struck by the sense that the biblical enterprise is very similar to the historical task, that the issues raised in Pressler's paper are issues equally important for both historical theology and biblical theology. Further, the enterprises can assist each other, and each can provide the other with insights to strengthen their tasks. The difficulty is in how to go about demonstrating the similarities in ways which permit us to speak together about the common aspects of our work.

I am grateful to Deborah E. McDowell, a womanist literary critic, for providing a first step toward this enterprise in her work on redefining sacred text (McDowell, 1988). Building on her definition, I would like to suggest that all of our history, both Christian and non-Christian, is a series of sacred texts. This is not to demean the unique role of the Bible in the life of Christian thought, but to begin a conversation about some similarities between the biblical and historical enterprises, some common grounds for questioning, and some ways in which each can aid the other.

Like Pressler, I am writing as a white, North American feminist in the context of the affluent academy. I share with Pressler the commitment to a reformist position; I understand myself to be Christian, and I am seeking ways to reclaim the Christian tradition which make it more accessible to women and to anyone who has been silenced by the canon of sacred texts which has formed our Christian heritage. As a preface to my own comments, then, I take the words from Pressler's conclusion: "The feminist struggle is grounded in opposition to any form of oppression. Its validity and vitality depend upon commitment to the liberation of all members of the human community, women and men." (Pressler, 1989:32)[1]

McDowell defines a sacred text by adapting M.M. Baktin's definition of authoritative discourse. She understands a sacred text as, "the already known . . . the already uttered . . . privileged language that approaches us from without . . . language that is distanced and permits no play with its framing context . . . We recite it . . . it has great power over us." (McDowell, 1988).[2] McDowell is writing as a literary critic, and focusing on the particular sacred text of slavery in the writings of African-American women. The sacred text of slavery is important, she suggests, not only for how it has been interpreted by its hearers, but for how it has itself interpreted its hearers. The text has unique shaping power in the African-American literary tradition. McDowell analyzes that power, and claims for African-American women the power to shape the text, in turn.

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[1] I accept, with Pressler, this description of the feminist task, recognizing that it is ideal at best and that there has been much heated discussion about the implicit racism and classism of the white, North American feminist project. I accept the label as the best available right now, and with a desire to be in conversations which will lead to fulfillment of the ideal, for my own work and for all who seek justice.

[2] Quotations from McDowell are taken from a personal transcription of an audio tape of her lecture. All quotes are from the introduction.

There is no single analogous historical text in the development of the [white] Western Christian tradition. Yet if we are to understand our history as it has shaped us, we need to look at the myriad lesser texts which comprise that tradition, and the privileged character of its sacred texts. The shaping power of these sacred texts is so great precisely because their privileged character goes unrecognized, perhaps because of the Protestant tendency to insist that the Bible is *the* sacred text, the *only* sacred text.

Language may be privileged, in our tradition, by virtue of the role it plays, as the Bible; or from the number of times it has been repeated, as the Apostles Creed; or from its distance from us. Its power comes from its ability to shape us and our worldview and from its authority over us, whether conscious or unconscious.

Sacred texts are the words which form the background for our discourse. They are the "truths" of our tradition which come to us preformed, which shape our context. For the most part, the language of these texts is so much a part of the way we perceive the world that it is difficult to receive them critically.

An article in *The Trenton Times* (October 9, 1988) dealt very much with this problem. It pointed out that George Washington was not the first president of the United Stated, that the Declaration of Independence was not signed on July 4, 1776, and that Columbus did not really discover America. Joseph Kane, the historian interviewed for the article, has spent his life investigating and challenging such truths about history. His work, he says, has often made his audiences angry, because he challenges their basic identity as North Americans.

These "texts" are sacred—they are never challenged; they are "holy" or set apart. They are also sacred in the sense that they have shaped how many U.S. citizens understand themselves and their nation.

Our history as *Christian* people has come to us as a kind of "canon" of truth; this canon we receive in Sunday school and seminary as the history necessary to understand ourselves as the people of God. The canon has been determined, for the most part, by a cultured elite, about whom Margaret Miles writes:

> Although they claim to speak universally, the men who wrote the normative texts of the major world religions in fact represent an atypical perspective in relation to most of the people of their cultures. [They were] literate, educated, and culturally privileged . . . (Miles, 1985:8)

Since the Reformation, education and articulation—and, by implication, the power to determine orthodoxy—has remained concentrated in the hands of the white, the male, and the European in Western Protestantism. Despite challenges by North American women and by liberation thinkers in North America, Latin America, and Africa, this continues to be true today, especially in the academy.

> Even when historians have acknowledged that the construction they present is simply one plausible picture—at best a picture that cannot be disproved by any available evidence—there is a more or less explicit claim for the historian's ability to understand a variety of perspectives presented by the evidence, to evaluate the validity of each, and to coordinate these perspectives in a God's eye view. (Miles, 1985:9)

The fact that Christian sacred texts are so often understood as the history of ideas—which, by implication, have universal validity—has obscured the need for understanding the particularity of an author's context. Those who write (and those who tell) the stories speak with a disembodied voice, as though the universal truth of the idea could be claimed without reference to the particularity of either reader or writer. This adds to the authority of the text: it speaks with a voice which cannot be challenged because it seems above both time and space, both reader and writer.

A separate problem for twentieth century Christians is the "myriad thicket of sacred narratives" to which we are heirs. As is evident from my earlier comments on the sacred texts of North American history, we have received a variety of sacred texts from our history, our culture, our literature, "all competing with each other for authority and domination" (McDowell, 1988). Thus the questions to be answered are not only about a particular text and context, but about the perspective the historian will bring to her work. "Which critical master shall I serve? To which sacred text shall I bow?" Perhaps, "Which texts will liberate and which texts will re-enslave?"

It is here, perhaps, that the common ground between feminist biblical scholarship and feminist historical scholarship is reached, and the questions raised by Pressler's paper can truly be said to be addressed to both. There are some differences between the two, and these are worth noting before discussing the commonalities.

First, the sacred texts of history have unstated authority. That is, they are not given the same kind of weight as the Bible in historical consideration. Therefore they are not as easy to confront: they are less an explicit part of our Christian self-understanding as the "background" for much of our thought and perception. In one sense this is appropriate, because the Bible does retain a unique place in the Protestant tradition. Yet, the historical task should not be neglected, because how we view the biblical texts is, in part, dependent upon our historical perspective. Implicitly or explicitly, we make choices about how to understand texts, and which texts we use, on the basis of what we already hold to be true. And we derive this understanding from our history and our tradition.

One relatively harmless example of this is the common assumption that Mary rode a donkey in the biblical nativity narratives. It is not a part of the biblical text, but it is so much a part of the "historic text of Christmas" that it is difficult to dissociate it from the picture we think of as biblical. A less harmless example is the change in iconographic depictions of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages: as the African slave trade became institutionalized, it became necessary to refigure these texts, so that the bride in the text would no longer be perceived as black, since that was an embarrassment to the texts which were being used to establish the inferiority of the African people.

A second difference between feminist biblical and feminist historical scholarship is that there are a variety of witnesses available for consultation in establishing historical "truth." This is especially noteworthy between historical studies and Hebrew Bible studies: in many cases, there simply are not "extra-canonical witnesses" available to the biblical scholar. The historian, on the other hand, may have diaries, icons, political records, and other sources from which to derive information about the social location and norms of the sacred text being examined. Questions raised about the origins, social location, and intended audiences of historical texts can be answered from a variety of sources, so that the tasks of reconstruction and refiguring are more easily accomplished by the historian.

A final significant difference is that in history there are competing witnesses to truth. This is again a factor in the "lesser authority" of traditions; it is also a feature which makes it possible to hope for a "re-visioning" of those texts which oppress. Although we have a sacred history which is the "text" of the dominant, colonial culture in Western Christendom, there are, and have always been, voices of protest from alternative texts. These are the voices of subjected peoples, mystics, and heretics who refused to be silenced and whose texts bear witness to other possibilities in Christian history. They have not always been heard—the power to hear has been largely retained by the controlling authorities—but they have always existed, especially since literacy became more widespread in the West.

Thus feminists and other liberation thinkers speak about the power to hear as well as to be heard, and there is an emphasis, especially among women, on "hearing each other into speech"—listening to the texts, not only for what is said but what is omitted;

listening to voices which are hidden behind the texts, listening for stories not yet told. (Morton, 1985:55-6, 127-9, 202-210; see also Mudflower Collective, 1985:155)

This difference is one which presents a particular temptation in feminist historical studies: to simply relativize all claims to truth and to refuse to judge critically between texts. Against this there is a recognized need, as there is in biblical studies, to preserve an ethical dimension in the "hearing." This is the establishment of a critical principle discussed at length by Pressler: the recognition that, "texts which support patriarchy must be examined, assessed, and rejected or reinterpreted, lest theology pass on values damaging to women (and men)." (Pressler, 1989:22)

On this issue the two disciplines can begin to support each other: biblical scholars by "articulating biblical grounding for feminist theological norms;" historians by recognizing and interpreting those norms as they have been present in the sacred texts of history. Historians might also work with biblical scholars in identifying those "prior theological decisions [which] determine which aspects of scripture scholars consider normative." (1989:24)

A second common issue which is identified by Pressler is that of the imaginative and symbolic dimension of the reconstructive task. In both fields there is a significant need for the re-imaging and reinterpretation of symbols, "in ways which give back to women our stories and our past." (1989:31) This task is crucial in representing our history and in re-figuring our lives.

McDowell identifies this as a particularly important feature of African-American women's literature: that these authors "attempt to re-imagine a female subjectivity . . . that dramatizes not what was done to slave women but what they did with what was done to them . . . This shifts the stress points of their lives and stories from victimization to creative agency." Here she identifies a crucial aspect of any such retelling of stories: that they provide the "texts" of empowerment, offering a vision of the past in such a way that it offers hope and guidance for the future.[3] Here is a significant point for "hearing each other into speech;" here also is a region in which we must tread carefully, as Pressler recognizes, lest we move too quickly to co-opt the stories of others as our own.

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[3] For an example of the ways that womanists are refiguring history as a part of the theological task, see Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Scholars Press, 1988)

Women in history have not always been passive recipients of the tradition; nor have they always been its victims; nor have they always been on the outside of history's meaning. There have been several stages in the writing of women's history: moving from a conception of history as something which is "done to" women, to a conception which is very similar to the task which Pressler cites from Mary Ann Tolbert: recognizing that women are equal heirs to the sacred texts of our history, and equally empowered to interpret and appropriate those texts (Lerner, 1976). This is one of the aspects of Pressler's paper that I would especially like to lift up. In order to claim our full heritage, we must learn to identify those aspects of the tradition which speak to the full human situation although they may be androcentrically framed, and we must reclaim them in ways which make them accessible to all people, for comfort, for challenge, or for liberation.

Finally, I would like to return to the necessity of conversation, of dialogue among those whose methods differ, and more particularly among those whose social locations have given them different readings of the historical texts. Knowing how limited are the sacred texts which we have received, we should be careful about creating a new canon which is, in its own way, equally limited. Recognizing those who have been silenced, we should practice "hearing others into speech." Sometimes liberation comes, not in our willingness to speak for others, but in our willingness to be silent so that those who have been voiceless may be heard.

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EPILOGUE

The intent of the *KOINONIA JOURNAL* is to generate a conversation. What you have in your hands is in one way the final stage of a process of dialogue. But in another (and we hope more important) sense, it is only the first stage of an on-going and broader conversation. What we will attempt to do in this epilogue is to briefly reflect on the stages of the conversation that lie behind the published texts, to the extent to which that may be useful in illuminating the difficulties and possibilities of interdisciplinary dialogue.

Carolyn Pressler's paper and the responses developed over a considerable period of time. As Carolyn mentions, she first wrote this paper for a doctoral seminar. She rewrote it for the forum. The editors met, discussed the paper, made several suggestions, and then Carolyn revised her paper again. The editors and respondents met in September to hear the first draft of the responses and for informal discussion. Both the presenter and the respondents then revised the work for the October forum with all Ph.D. students. After the forum, respondents had additional time to revise their responses.

In the on-going process, culminating in the presentation of the paper and responses at the October forum, the discussion tended to center around two issues. The first was the nature of biblical theology. Ernie Hess (one of the respondents), wondered what it meant to call the work of the selected feminists, biblical theology, if they self-consciously appropriated some of the tasks of constructive theology; and what it meant to call biblical theology a separate discipline, if it was in fact constructive theology that they were doing. Carolyn had, indeed, struggled with this issue in the various recessions of her paper. On the one hand, she could easily acknowledge that the work of Ruether, Fiorenza and Trible was significantly different from traditional biblical theologians. But, on the other hand, they themselves called their work biblical theology and some of their activities, did indeed resemble the traditional work of so-called biblical theologians. In the end, she decided not to concentrate on terminology but on the substance of the "creative clash."

As a further example of first type of question, in the public forum a person from the biblical department asked if there was not still room for essentially "descriptive" work. Carolyn responded with examples of the way gender bias had affected even translation, an area in which it is usually assumed that one is able to obtain a fairly high degree of objectivity. Although the Hebrew text of Jeremiah 31:22 clearly says that "a woman surrounds a man," translators have found this reversal of sex roles so improbable that they have sought alternate translations. The questioner agreed, but asked if "historical dispassionateness" should not still be held up as an ideal. Carolyn responded that all accurate interpretations are not equally valid. The person agreed, but did not seem satisfied. It is not entirely clear what the intent of such a question is. On the one hand, if it means to ask if there would still be room for historians within the field, then the answer would have to be 'Yes.' On the other hand, if it suggests that one understand Carolyn to be advocating the biased distortion of texts, the answer would have to be more discriminating. Of course, she is not advocating that our biases be given free reign, but she wishes rather to insist on the self-critical and ethical responsibilities of the interpreter. We mention this discussion in particular because it illustrates how that even within the same discipline, varying social situations and schools of thought, can make mutual understanding no mean achievement.

The second issue was the relation between tradition and experience. During his response Steve Stell pointed out that "all experience is traditioned experience and all tradition is experienced tradition." He affirmed those statements in Carolyn's paper which reflect this relationship but took issue with the opposing of tradition and experience in Carolyn's statement that: "the authority of women's opposition to domination has an integrity independent of Scripture or tradition." In the course of the conversation, a number of women expressed uneasiness with what seemed to be the idea that feminists could not stand apart from the tradition. Perhaps the graduate student from the practical theology department most clearly summarized the reservations of the group. First, she pointed out how the insistence on the inter-relatedness of tradition and experience might lead some women to a sense of hopelessness. For instance, when she worked with people from dysfunctional families, she did not feel that because they were from dysfunctional families, they would always be handicapped. Rather, she felt that by naming the dysfunction they could gain some freedom from it. Similarly, feminists, by naming patriarchy, gain some freedom from the tradition. Second, she was uncomfortable when people spoke about "*the* tradition." She felt that feminists were indeed able to do something different because they had access to alternate traditions with which they could critique the dominant tradition.

In response, Steve agreed that there were many traditions and that feminists did have access to alternate traditions from which they could critique the dominant tradition. In any given situation creative insight could strengthen the relative independence of "experience" over against tradition or vice versa. Steve argued that his basic point was that one should not start with the assumption of a fundamental polarity of experience and tradition, which must then somehow be brought together. At this point, a graduate student in the Religion and Society department noted that from a sociological perspective it might be helpful to see a distinction between religion, as the actual symbols and practices of the people, and theology, as the dogmatic (theoretical) system within which such practices are nurtured, interpreted and critiqued. She suggested that part of the problem was that Steve was talking about theology and the women were talking about religion.

But however significant the issues raised were, what was not discussed was equally revealing. The discussion centered around traditional (male) concerns. It was noticeable that Kimberly Chastain's response was of a quite different type than the two other responses and yet there was no discussion of these differences or, for that matter, Kimberly's response. The discussion centered around the other responses. And, although the forum was very well attended, aside from the editors, few women in the audience spoke. This may be because this was the first time they had seen or heard the paper, or it may be because, in a guild that is still largely male dominated, expressing one's views on this topic could be rather risky. It seemed indicative of the pervasiveness of patriarchy that even though most men were sympathetic to feminism, the agenda of the participating men determined the course of the discussion.

But perhaps even more significant than the various issues that were or were not discussed, is what was learned about the very dynamics of conversation itself. It seemed to us that the "hermeneutical onion" has at least three layers. In the first place there is the irreducibly personal level. We all come to a conversation with our own agendas, backgrounds, interests and idiosyncracies. Conversation is affected as much by tone, personal expectations and inhibitions, etc. as it is by substantive issues. In the second place, we soon learned just how specialized and fragmented theological studies have become. The problems of inter-disciplinary dialogue are real even within the traditional four-fold disciplinary matrix of the divinity school or seminary. At a deeper level, particularly in the context of the topic at hand, one begins to be aware of the more structural elements that condition the very forums and language we use for our dialogue.

Perhaps one of the most important considerations to come out of the conversation process is the ability to tell the difference between a politically neutral and a politically significant discussion. One could perhaps argue that the status of Biblical theology is politically neutral, but that is precisely what the status of woman's experience is not.

Carolyn has expressed gratitude for the response to her paper since the forum. The paper created discussions among the faculty and students of the biblical department. A number of people who were not present asked for copies of the paper. And others from the seminary and the university asked to have coffee with her (the real mark of distinction in academia!) The discussion will continue.

— ARTHUR W. WALKER-JONES
— JOHN W. WEBSTER

Book Reviews

Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics. By Donald Capps. Fortress Press, 1984. 127 pages.

The science of hermeneutics typically has addressed itself to the process by which one comes to understand a "meaningful" or classic text. In Capps' *Pastoral Care and Hermeneutics,* a significant contribution has been made in extending the task of hermeneutics into the arena of pastoral actions. While such "pastoral actions are occurring all the time," each unique unto itself, Capps recognizes the need for a general methodology for "helping us to understand what effect these actions are having on the lives of the individuals they touch." (p. 11) His premise is that hermeneutics provides promising possibilities for establishing such a framework.

Acknowledging the seeds of this approach have come from various sources, including the CPE action-reflection model, Capps nevertheless believes the CPE model needs refurbishing, for it is not very useful in *defining* pastoral actions, nor is it clear as a *methodology* for reflection. Guided specifically by Ricoeur, Capp's use of hermeneutical principles is based on the proposal that meaningful human actions function for those involved very much like meaningful texts function for their readers.

The book begins with a chapter examining Ricoeur's work. Meaningful actions, for Ricoeur, are like texts in that they leave their mark, i.e., have a significance which endures beyond the moment of the action; have unintended consequences, meanings their agents did not intend; create a world, e.g., of faith, of shared pain, of communication; and are always open to reinterpretation. The process Ricoeur proposes first involves making a "guess" at the action's meaning, based on one's pre- understanding; second, focusing on "explanatory schemata," i.e., some criteria which will illuminate the initial guess while providing critical distance; and finally, gaining an understanding of the action's world-disclosing power. I have collapsed Capps' appropriation of major themes of Ricoeur under the following six headings:

1) The Pastor's Intention. Like texts, pastoral actions have effects the pastor did not intend. Capps is interested in the intent expressed in the action itself. The pastor is "de- psychologized."

2) No Privileged Interpreters. Capps writes: "It cannot be said that only the pastor and those who were physically present at the time of the action are in a position to understand what the action means. In fact, it is very likely that other persons to whom the action is subsequently reported will see meanings in the action that were not perceived by the persons involved." (p. 44)

3) The World-Disclosiveness of a Pastoral Action. Ricoeur believes that not only does a reader interpret a text, but that the text also "interprets" the reader, i.e., it "discloses a world" of its own which the reader must appropriate if true understanding is to take place. What dynamics are involved in enabling a pastoral action to be world-disclosive? Capps creatively addresses this question specifically in the final chapter. He employs the literary genre of autobiography, because autobiographies, like most reports of pastoral care actions, are narratives, and because autobiograpahy enables us to consider form (genre) and metaphorical content which are the dynamic agents of world disclosure. A pastoral action, at its heart, is a kind of autobiography, an "exercise in self-awareness."

Capps discusses three major types of autobiographical forms (oratory, drama, and poetry) which he suggests present the author in terms of a responsible self, a believable self, or an accessible self. He then goes on to suggest three categories for evaluating pastoral actions in light of these three "self-metaphors." They are illumination, transformation, and conversion. "Illumination" occurs when because of the pastoral action persons become more like their dominant self-metaphor. "Transformation" is evident when the pastoral action effects a change from one dominant self-metaphor to another in a "perception-shattering" experience. "Conversion" takes place when a pastoral action leads an individual not previously oriented to any of these self-metaphors to become oriented to one of them. Capps is careful to note that "not all such changes are directly precipitated by pastoral actions, for the disclosive power of God is certainly not captive to ecclesiastical structures. But when pastoral actions are disclosive, we may look for evidence of one or more of these effects..." (p. 113)

4) The Roles of Genre and Metaphor. Just as a written text's genre establishes a certain range or set of limits for interpreting the text, so, too, does the genre of a pastoral action establish boundaries of interpretation. For example, the genre of "hospital visitation to a dying patient" sets up a quite different range of possible world-disclosures than the genre of "premarital counseling." "The text's metaphorical content is also extremely important for its world-disclosive possibilities, because metaphorical language is the bridge between the ostensive references of the text and those that disclose a world. It contributes to such disclosure by using the known world (or immediate situation) as a screen through which we glimpse the lesser known world (or world disclosed)." (p. 45)

5) Conceptual Schemata in Interpreting Pastoral Action. Capps suggests we can best understand the power of metaphor by using some kind of cognitive schema, model, or theory by which to test the objective reality of the action. He devotes one chapter to creating such a schema. In it he identifies three "models of theological diagnosis" which pastors typically use in addressing others' problems and needs: the contextual model, in which the minister somewhat directively identifies the potential causes of the problem and guides the person to spiritual resources for dealing with it (a modality of pastor as shepherd); the experiential model, in which the minister tries to expose superficial formulations of the problem and then view it in light of human capacity to deeply share one

another's burdens (a modality of pastor as wounded healer); and the revisionist model, in which the pastor tries to identify underlying motivations and thereby bring new light to bear on solving the problem (suggesting a modality of pastor as wise fool). Capps does not judge which pastoral modality is best, considering all three to be potentially helpful. His efforts instead focus on identifying the pastoral modality in operation in a given action in order to more fully and objectively "understand" its world-disclosiveness. 6) Critical Distance and the Problem of False Consciousness. Capps believes his model provides adequate critical distance in the evaluation of pastoral actions because he derived the above models from *preaching* styles, not pastoral care sources. Pastors may, however, show evidence of false consciousness in their own evaluations of their pastoral actions; e.g., they may believe they are operating from a "wounded healer" modality in a given action, whereas, upon closer examination, another modality actually may be more evident.

It is impossible in this brief review to adequately capture the complex and weighty structure which Capps has developed in this deceptively thin volume. This book may not be readily accessible to a casual or hurried reader. It takes considerable thought and creativity on the part of the reader to derive a practical *method* for evaluating pastoral actions from Capps' *methodology*. Nevertheless, Capps makes explicit the need for, and key ingredients of, a more fully developed model for reflection on pastoral actions and the changes which such actions bring about. Significant groundwork has been laid toward establishing a methodology of pastoral understanding and evaluation in a creative and systematic manner. In this regard this book should prove an enduring addition to the pastoral disciplines.

— ROBERT C. DYKSTRA

An Introduction to the Old Testament; A Feminist Perspective. By Alice L. Laffey. Fortress Press, 1988. 243 pages.

Anyone who has ever taken an introductory class on the Bible is familiar with the genre of historical-critical introduction to the Old Testament. These works usually treat each book or body of literature in the Hebrew Bible individually, either in chronological or canonical order. Authorship, date, and historical setting of the literature are discussed in order to best understand the intention of the original author. The treatment of each book of the Bible often have sub-titles such as—"Date," "Authorship," and "Historical Setting." The author usually tries to be as "objective" and dispassionate as possible in cataloguing the results of historical-critical study of the Bible.

In some ways, Alice Laffey's book can be categorized within this genre. In order to make her work as compatible as possible with other introductions to the Old Testament, she presents the major bodies of literature in canonical order—"Part I: The Pentateuch," "Part II: The Deuteronomistic History," "Part III: The Major and Minor Prophets," "Part IV: The Writings"—and she introduces individual books chronologically within these bodies of literature. Furthermore, each part begins with two sections on historical and literary considerations that summarize the results of historical-critical and literary study of these bodies of literature in an admirably clear and concise manner.

On the other hand, there are many signs of the disintegration of the genre. Far from being "objective" and disinterested, the preface announces the suasive intent of the book: Laffey hopes that the readers will "*themselves develop a feminist critical consciousness*" (p. xii). The nature of the discussion is reflected by the sub-titles. Each part of the book is divided into two major parts—"Themes From A Feminist Perspective" and "Texts From A Feminist Perspective." The first of these subdivisions is further divided by sub-titles that read: "Patriarchy and Hierarchy," "Israel's History as Men's History," "Language: Masculine by Preference and a Male God," "Women as Men's Possessions," "Role Stereotyping and Sexual

Discrimination," and "Exceptions within a Patriarchal Culture." These sub-titles are repeated in each part of the book with the major variations being treatments of "Woman as Metaphor for City, Country, and People" in the discussions of the major and minor prophets and the writings.

A few examples should give some idea of the content of these sections. In "Patriarchy and Hierarchy" Laffey documents the evidence of the hierarchical order of society with women below men of their class and distinctions between women being made on the basis of the men to whom they belong and their ability to bear children. In "Women as Men's Possessions" she points out that Jacob "bought" his wives (p. 158), that wives are enumerated among men's possessions (p. 80), and that adultery is considered a crime against the man who owned the other woman not the woman herself. In "Exceptions within a Patriarchal Society," Laffey points to women who are remembered despite the dominant patriarchal bias of the writers, to passages in Deutero-Isaiah that portray God as mother, and to the egalitarian thrust of passages like Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Joel 2.

This last sub-section, "Exceptions within a Patriarchal Society" forms a transition to the second major section in each part, "Texts from a Feminist Perspective" which remembers the women in the Hebrew Bible who often go unnamed and, even if named, have been largely ignored by later commentators. "Why," she asks, "do most historical critics suggest a more important role for Aaron, but ignore the data which suggests a more important role for Miriam?"(pp. 52-53). In her paper, Carolyn Pressler mentions the disagreement that sometimes arises among feminists using the same method over whether a particular passage supports patriarchy or not. This is because women who are extolled by the biblical texts may be extolled because their fulfillment of traditional roles supports patriarchy. Laffey handles this symbolic ambiguity well. She tells the story of these women that are extolled by the biblical text, so that the few references to women there are will not be forgotten. At the same time, she notes they are extolled for fulfilling traditional roles. In addition, she critiques patriarchal interpretations of women like Jezebel and Bathsheba and holds up women like Vashti who refused to be paraded before her husband, the king's, drunken friends.

Laffey's book "is intended to complement those books which have traditionally been used to introduce students to the study of the Old Testament" (p. 1), and it does this well. But this complementary work also quietly calls into question the hermeneutical foundations of the traditional genre. Laffey shows little interest in the type of historical reconstruction which typifies traditional introductions (the discussion is more like the work of Trible than that of Fiorenza). On the one hand, this absence of historical reconstruction may be unfortunate for feminism because it allows the history of public affairs that is predominantly the history of powerful men to remain *the* history, rather than recovering the histories of common people and women. The reconstruction of women's history using archaeology and the Hebrew Bible seems to be a vast untravelled land that promises treasures untold. On the other hand, Laffey's emphasis reflects the decision of many feminist interpreters of the Hebrew Bible that a culturally cued, literary reading is most fruitful. This emphasis accurately reflects the emphasis of the bulk literature she is summarizing.

In addition to the lack of historical reconstruction, Laffey's work calls into question the idea that the meaning of a text resides solely with the author. For instance, acknowledging that in a patriarchal culture the author's intent was not to laud Eve, she notes that "feminists are now lauding her as a true initiator, the significant decision maker in the story." Similarly, she identifies with Delilah rather than Samson. In contrast to traditional introductions and commentaries, "meaning" resides in the reader as well as in the text and its author's intention.

Laffey's work was eagerly awaited by some of us and now we have before us an invaluable resource. It is not intended to be read alone, but its summaries of feminist scholarship on particular passages and extensive bibliographies ensures that it will be a constant reference tool which, as the body of feminist scholarship continues to burgeon, will need to be updated. We can now look forward to new introductions that will integrate feminist concerns and infuse the genre of introductory text with new content and perhaps an entirely new form.

— ARTHUR W. WALKER-JONES

Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible. By Renita J. Weems. LuraMedia, 1988. 145 Pages.

This book is an attempt to combine the views and methods of current feminist biblical scholarship with the African-American tradition of oral story-telling. Weems takes nine biblical passages which concern women—Hagar and Sarah, Lot's wife and her daughters, Miriam and her sister-in-law, Jepthath's daughter and her mourning women, Naomi and Ruth, Vashti and Esther, Elizabeth and Mary, Martha and Mary, the female disciples of Jesus—and imaginatively reconstructs them to bring to life possible issues and emotions with which the women dealt. The particular interest of the book is to examine how women in Scripture relate to one another and to explicate the similarities with issues that confront women's relationships today. Weems' scholarship pursues justice for all women. As she gives voices to the silent ones in our biblical tradition, we hear accounts of classism, racism, and oppresion between women as well as sisterly affection and liberation.

An example is the reconstruction of the relationship between Miriam and her Ethiopian sister-in-law. Weems portrays for the reader a Miriam who was a talented leader, instrumental in the Israelites' liberation from Egyptian slavery, and who had worked for the sake of her brother Moses since she was a girl. But her position still depended upon her place as the primary woman in Moses' life, a position she unwillingly lost when her brother decided to marry. Weems considers the bitterness of Miriam toward her foreign sister-in-law in order that we today, who also often have friction within our families and particularly between sisters-in-law, can see a story of ourselves. And in Miriam we find a woman who looks much like our talented and charismatic sisters today fighting for their deserved positions of leadership in religious institutions.

While this book is written non-technically, in simple though graceful language, Weems' exegetical skill is apparent. Although the origins of a few of her reconstructive elements are unclear (for instance, I am not familiar with a tradition which holds Lot's wife to suffer from emotional illness), her historical-critical and literary interpretive methodology is solid.

Just a Sister Away is written specifically for African-American women who do not necessarily have an academic background. How then, as graduate students in religion, can we appreciate this book? Most particularly, it can help us to understand women and their relationships in a manner far different than our centuries of androcentric religious tradition and scholarship have taught us. It also confronts our interpretations, challenging us to see all biblical women fairly.

Through the questions for thought at the end of each chapter, we are invited to reconsider our social situations today in light of the situations of these women.

The book is also profitable as an example of how we can use the issues and methods of current biblical scholarship in ways that are thought-provoking and educative to laypersons as well as academics. *Just a Sister Away* would be helpful as a text in teaching courses in biblical studies, women's studies, or interpretive method. It would also be good to recommend to students interested in womanist or feminist concerns. I believe that many students will indeed find in Renita J. Weems' work "stories of women they can recognize and a God they can trust."

— L. M. DAY

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